GERTRUDE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"AMY HERBERT," AND "STORIES ILLUSTRATIVE OF
THE LORD'S PRAYER."

EDITED BY

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"Turn to private life
And social neighbourhood, look we to ourselves;
A light of duty shines on every day
For all."
The Excursion.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR
LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN, AND LONGMANS,
PATERNOSTER-ROW.
1846.

MURRAY AND GIBB, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.



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CHAPTER I.

It was a calm bright morning in the beginning of September. The brilliancy of the summer tints had scarcely begun to fade, and the warm breath of the south breeze, as it wandered amongst the foliage of the trees, and played with the flickering shadows on the turf, gave no indication that the glory of the year was departing. But there is something in the knowledge that autumn is near, which will often cast a shade over the fair face of nature, from the contrast between the charm of its present beauty and the desolation which we feel to be at hand: lovely though it may be, we view it with something of sadness mingled with our pleasure, for, like the last sweet smile of a cherished friend, we are conscious that, even while we are yet gazing, it is passing away from our sight.

And perhaps it was a thought such as this, which caused the sigh that escaped from Edith Courtenay, as she stood at the library window of Elsham Priory, and looked upon the sunny prospect before her.

The scene was one of quiet, home beauty, often to be met with in England. To the right lay a cheerful village, partly embosomed in trees, and partly clustering around the base of a steep, conical hill, which

had once been the station of a Roman encampment. The church, with its spire pointing to the blue heavens, and its white tombstones shining in the morning sun, stood near, upon another hill of less considerable elevation; while, immediately adjoining, stretched the woods and lawns of Allingham Park, long in the possession of the elder branch of the Courtenay family. The house, an edifice of Grecian architecture, with no pretensions to beauty beyond a handsome Ionic colonnade, almost fronted the Priory; and to the left, the eye, after passing over a few miles of wooded country, rested upon the outline of the low hills, which, receding one behind the other, formed a barrier between the valley of Elsham and the sea.

The Priory of Elsham existed now only in name; its rich endowments and lands having, in the reign of Henry the Eighth, shared the fate of the other church properties which were sacrificed to the rapacity of that monarch and his favourites. From that time the building, deserted by its former inmates, gradually fell into decay, and the crumbling walls at length entirely disappeared, as the stones were taken to form barns and stables for the farm, which, in after years, occupied the spot where the Priory had stood. The modern Priory, consisting of a square front of recent date, and a long wing erected about a hundred years before, had no connection with the old religious house except that of bearing the same designation. It was of moderate size, containing the usual number of apartments,—a library and drawing-room opening into each other, a good dining-room, a small study, and bed-rooms in proportion; and in its general appearance gave signs of comfort, opulence, and good taste; the latter being principally exhibited in the quiet unostentatious style of the furniture, and the skill with which the few acres of pleasure ground adjoining the house were laid

out, so as to afford the greatest variety, and command the most striking points of view.

To the world it might have seemed that, with such a home, and in the possession of youth, health, friends, and affluence, Edith Courtenay could have had no cause to sigh; and certainly there were no traces of sorrow in her open brow, her deep blue eye, or the half smile upon her lip. At nineteen, she was too young to have experienced the cares of the world, and too buoyant in spirit to feel more than a passing dread of its trials; but she was not too young to have had experience in those petty everyday annoyances which are often mercifully sent us in early life, to prepare us for the real afflictions that await us in after years; and much as she might have been envied by many, there were circumstances in her situation which might justly have caused them to hesitate before they pronounced her happy. On this morning, however, the shade soon passed from her mind. It was only caused by the remembrance of the summer pleasures which were now almost gone; and when she joined her mother and her two sisters at the breakfast table, her voice was the most cheerful, and her smile the gayest, of the little party.

"We are very late this morning," said Mrs Courtenay, looking at her watch. "Do, Jane, go into the drawing-room, and tell me exactly what o'clock it is by the timepiece."

"It is not much later than usual, mamma," replied Jane, in a languid tone, and not offering to move; "I dare say your watch is quite right."

"I beg your pardon, Jane," said Edith, "it is just now half-past nine; and I have been waiting at least half an hour."

"Well!" said Jane, rather sharply, "I suppose it will not kill you, even if you have."

"No, not kill me," replied Edith; "but it is very inconvenient: I ought to be at the school by ten."

"The school again to-day!" exclaimed Charlotte, who had hitherto been busily employed in making breakfast; "I thought you were there yesterday."

"So I was; but that is no precise reason why I should not be there again to-day."

"No," replied Charlotte, with a satirical smile, "not in your case, though it might be in another person's. All the world are not so devoted to schools as yourself."

Mrs Courtenay, who was still examining her watch, again spoke: "Charlotte, my dear, I am certain that I am at least ten minutes too fast, and it really makes me uncomfortable; I wish you would look at the timepiece."

"In a minute, mamma," said Charlotte; and she continued to pour out the tea, and then proceeded to cut bread for the party; while Edith went to obtain the desired information. "Ah! thank you, my love," said her mother, when she returned; "I thought I was wrong. It quite disturbs me in the night if I fancy that my watch is out of order; and last night I could hardly sleep at all; I was so dreadfully nervous."

"Did you try Gertrude's remedy?" asked Edith; "it did you good before."

"Yes, so it did; every thing that comes from Gertrude does me good; but it was not mixed, and I was obliged to go without it."

Edith looked reproachfully at her sisters. "I was so busy, yesterday," she said, "at the school in the morning, and in the village in the afternoon, and I depended upon you to attend to it."

"I forgot it," replied Charlotte; "and I had no time. Miss Forester called and paid a long visit, and I was only able to have a few minutes' walk before dinner."

"I wish Gertrude would make me sleep too," said Jane. "I never have more than three hours' rest at once, and I am as tired this morning as if I had walked ten miles: I am sure Mr Humphreys cannot understand my case."

"Can any one?" asked Charlotte, whose brilliant colour and sparkling eyes differed so entirely from Jane's sallow complexion, and look of general ill-health, that the family likeness was scarcely discernible. "You have as many cases as there are days in the year: which is it this morning? Gout, rheumatism, tic douloureux, or ague? or is it all conjoined—the essence of every complaint that ever was heard of?"

"I wish you could feel as I do, only for ten minutes," said Jane.

"Thank you, I dare say I should survive it; but remember, Jane, what I complain of, is not your taking possession of any one pet malady, but making a monopoly of the whole race of diseases,—monopoly of illness implies monopoly of pity; and really I have so many little secret griefs of my own, that I must insist upon having a share in the commiseration our friends bestow upon you."

"I would not give you much for the whole," said Jane; "there is not one person in a hundred who knows what real pity means."

"Perhaps not," answered Charlotte; "but for every-day purposes make-believe pity does just as well."

"No, no," exclaimed Edith, "nothing that is make-believe can ever be of any value."

"Is that to be your motto all your life, Edith?" asked Charlotte; "because, if so, you had better retire from society at once, for every one knows it is made up of make-believes."

"That is one of your misanthropical notions,

Charlotte, which you hold from mere perversity. I know that fashionable society often is pretence and show; but I never will think that there is no sincerity to be met with in a quiet country-place like this."

"Miss Forester, for instance," said Jane sarcastically.

"She is an exception, and of course proves the rule. In London, I dare say she might not be remarkable; but here, the very fact of your bringing her forward, shows that she is different from her neighbours."

"Well," exclaimed Charlotte, "I am thankful to say, that I am neither philosophical nor metaphysical. I am willing to take the world as I find it; and if people are civil to me, it never enters my head to analyse their motives."

"But," said Edith, "there is no occasion for you to do it; you determine beforehand that they are all interested and selfish."

"Yes; and I find it is much for my happiness in the end: I am never disappointed in any one."

"Indeed, Charlotte," said Edith gravely, "I wish you would not talk in such a random way; because I am sure, when persons are in the habit of saying the same things continually, they at last believe them to be true."

"But that is just my case," replied Charlotte "I do believe them to be true, and therefore I say them; and I am not alone in my opinion: Jane talks in the same way sometimes. Besides, Edith, we are older than you, and must know more of the world."

"A year or two can make but little difference," replied Edith, "and if you were a hundred years older, I should not agree with you. I will give you some examples, and prove to you that you must be wrong. What do you say to Edward and Gertrude? You do not think them hypocrites?"

"Gertrude a hypocrite! my dears," said Mrs Courtenay, looking up from the newspaper she had been reading; "what do you mean?"

"Nothing! ma'am," replied Charlotte shortly; and then, unheeding the interruption, she went on: "You will use such harsh words, Edith; no one pretends to say that all the world are hypocrites, but only that there is a certain gloss, a French polish, over their words and actions, which does not hide, but exaggerates. As for Gertrude, I always put her out of the question when I am talking of people in general. I suppose she is—yes, she must be—sincere."

"And Edward," said Edith eagerly, "you do not doubt him?"

"No," said Charlotte, "not doubt exactly—he is sincere at the moment he is speaking, but what he says is not quite to be depended upon."

"O! Charlotte," exclaimed Edith indignantly, while the colour mounted to her cheeks, as she heard such an opinion expressed of her only brother—the very idol of her imagination.

"You need not be in such a hurry to be angry," said Charlotte coolly. "Edward is my brother as well as yours, so I have an equal reason for wishing him to be perfection; but I am not blind; I can see, and so can every one else who watches him, that he is inconsistent. You could see it, if you would."

"It may be either *can*, or *will*, which is the cause," replied Edith; "but I am certain I do not see it. I wish you had heard his conversation with me when he was last here; and all his plans for doing good."

"Excellent they were, of course, beginning with the rebuilding of the burnt cottages at the quarry, and ending with a new church on Torrington Heath."

"And the intermediate degrees being infant, national, and Sunday schools, upon Edith's most approved principles," said Jane.

"You may sneer at me if you will," exclaimed Edith angrily, "but if only a fourth part of the world were as good as Edward ——"

"It would be a very different world from what it is," said Charlotte. "I quite grant, Edith, that to hear Edward talk, you would believe him an angel; and that to see him act, you would think him a superior mortal; but I must contend for it, that he does not show to you or to the world the average standard of his principles: every one sees the best of him at first sight."

"I thought you were no philosopher," said Edith, in a suppressed tone of extreme annoyance.

"It does not require much philosophy to see the faults of one's brothers and sisters," replied Charlotte.

"Nor one's own either," said Edith, recovering herself; "I know that I have felt angry, and I am very sorry for it."

Charlotte scarcely noticed the apology, but, rising from the breakfast table, began to search amongst the books for something she had mislaid.

"At what time shall you be able to practise with me?" she said; "we sang that trio wretchedly last night, and really I cannot exhibit myself in the same way again."

"You must practise without me," said Edith; "I shall not be home till half-past twelve; and directly after luncheon, I am going with Mrs Grantley to see nurse Philips."

"Do let nurse Philips rest for to-day," said Jane; "you were with her only three days ago."

"Six, at the least," replied Edith; "besides, I have promised."

"Oh! of course," said Jane, "all promises must be kept—those made at home excepted. You said you would try over the trio, and some of the duets besides."

"Well, so I will, by and by; but I must go now, or I shall be dreadfully late."

"Is Edith gone?" asked Mrs Courtenay, looking round when her daughter had left the room.

"Yes, to the school, mamma," replied Charlotte.

"But she told me she would show me how to do the knitting from the pattern which Gertrude sent. I shall never be able to manage it without her."

"You understand it, Jane, don't you?" said Charlotte.

"Yes; that is, I tried it once; but I should not be able to begin; and I must finish this book, for it must be sent away to-day."

"It would not be much trouble to try the work," said Charlotte; "and if you succeed, mamma will be able to go on."

"Well, I will see about it presently," replied Jane; and she went to fetch her book, and then, seating herself by the drawing-room window, forgot her mother's wishes, till again reminded of them by Charlotte.

Edith pursued her walk to the school in no very enviable state of mind; for although daily accustomed to such a conversation as had just passed, use had not as yet become a second nature. She differed with her sisters upon almost every point, both of principle and taste; and the irritation of perpetual disagreement was at times more than she could bear with temper.

She felt something like degradation also, in thinking of the impression a stranger would have received from the tone in which she had been tempted to reply to Charlotte's observations; and her conscience bitterly

reproached her for having broken the serious resolution, made only a few hours before, of endeavouring, if possible, to spend that one day without yielding to provocation. Perhaps on any other subject she might have been invulnerable; but to speak against Edward, was to touch that which was nearest and dearest to her in the world; and if her self-accusation had been less sincere, she might have found some excuse for her annoyance in the greatness of the trial; but, as it was, she was too vexed with herself to complain of her sister, or to feel pained, as she often did, at the contrast between what her home really was, and what she knew it ought to be.

The school in some measure diverted her thoughts from herself. The mistress was ill, and she had engaged to take charge of the children for an hour and a half every day, till a proper substitute could be found; and the necessity of attending to them had a great effect in restoring her equanimity, as she forgot for the time that there were any other persons in the world besides tiresome Anne Godfrey, and dull little Sarah Plowden, and the rest of the half mischievous, half frightened tribe of children, whom she was endeavouring to reduce into something like order. The morning passed quickly away, for Edith had an innate love of teaching and managing, and what to others would have been the most tiresome of all tiresome tasks, was to her only a subject of interest; and she felt sorry, when at twelve o'clock the children were dismissed, and she was obliged to return to the Priory—to her mother's uncongeniality, and Jane's peevishness, and Charlotte's satire. The feeling was not exactly acknowledged, but it caused her unconsciously to linger on the road, and to indulge in a day dream of happiness, which could never be realised, but in which her two sisters had no share. There was another, indeed,

who was always foremost in Edith's visions of enjoyment, but she was absent—living with an invalid aunt of her father's, who had taken a fancy to her when she was about fourteen, and had persuaded her parents to part with her, on the promise that she should inherit all her little property at her death. The temptation might not to some have been very great, since Mrs Heathfield's income was not more than five hundred a year; but it would at least be a comfortable provision for Gertrude, and Mr Courtenay was too much harassed with family cares to allow a dislike to parting with his child to interfere with a plan which promised well for her worldly advantage.

How Gertrude was to be educated, or what principles were to be instilled into her mind, he never inquired. Though possessed of first-rate talents himself, he considered them of but little importance in a woman. He had married a young and very pretty girl, devoid of any cultivation of mind beyond the superficial acquirements of the day; and she had implicitly obeyed his orders, and had never thwarted his wishes even by a look of ill humour; and, though now and then irritated by her weak simplicity, on the whole he was contented;—what satisfied him must of course satisfy every one else,—he asked nothing more than that Gertrude should possess lady-like manners, a moderate share of accomplishments, a quiet, easy temper, and five hundred a year. With these advantages she would pass through life easily, and would die surrounded by friends and comforts; and then—but of what was to come afterwards Mr Courtenay never thought. This world was his home, his hope, his happiness. In the existence of another he believed—he had been taught to do so from his childhood—and in occasional moments of weariness he could discourse eloquently upon the

vanity of earthly enjoyments; and when grieved at the loss of a friend, he could sigh, and express a hope of meeting him again in heaven: but when the words were repeated, the feeling was gone; and Mr Courtenay returned to his easy chair, and his well-stored library, and forgot that if the heaven of which he had spoken were ever to be reached, it must be through the strait gate of penitence and faith, and by the narrow way of daily self-denial.

If left to her father's care, Gertrude Courtenay would probably have grown up the very counterpart of himself, except with superior energy of mind. She had his generosity, his good temper, and his high sense of honour; but she had also his pride, his love of command, his keen sense of the importance of the world's applause, and his delight in everything that was beautiful and luxurious. And in her own home these feelings would have been fostered to the utmost; but in the retirement of a country village, with no companion but her aunt, there was little opportunity for their development; and before she was placed in any scenes of greater temptation, she had learnt to study her own heart, and to pray and strive against its weaknesses. In what way the principle of religion had first taken root in her mind, it would have been almost impossible for her to have told. It had sprung up, unnoticed even by herself, in constant intercourse with one whose minutest actions were governed by its rules; for although Mrs Heathfield, from illness, and natural reserve, but seldom conversed upon the subject, there was an influence in her meek, uncomplaining resignation, and her self-denying charity, which it was impossible for a mind so thoughtful as Gertrude's to withstand.

Perhaps, indeed, the influence was the greater from the very fact of there being something of silence and mystery connected with it. When first taken to

Farleigh Cottage, Gertrude had felt as if removed into a new world; new, not merely in its external appearance, but in the motives and feelings of the persons who inhabited it; and when the first grief at separation from her home had subsided, she found daily cause for increasing wonder. Her aunt watched over her carefully by directing her studies; but she was too unwell actually to superintend them. She could only recommend the books she wished her to read, and give her reasons for admiring them; and then Gertrude was left to think by herself upon the difference between her father's taste and her aunt's; and to endeavour, if possible, to discover which was based upon the highest principles. The answer, if left to her own inclination, would have been in her father's favour; but, to counteract the force of an early impression, she had daily before her eyes the picture of patience, humility, entire freedom from selfishness, and a thoughtful care which never forgot even the most distant objects of compassion. Gertrude deeply felt her aunt's goodness; she looked on it as on something surpassingly strange, almost unearthly; and she could not but believe that the subjects which interested her, must be in themselves far superior to all others. And so the first bias was given in favour of religion; and the seed which had been implanted at baptism, and then buried beneath the distractions and frivolities of a careless education, grew up by imperceptible degrees into a strength and beauty unknown only to its possessor.

But notwithstanding the quiet peacefulness of Gertrude's life at Farleigh, her heart still clung to the recollection of her own home and her childish pleasures, with a tenacity which neither time nor distance could entirely destroy. There were many solitary hours in which she longed for the society of her sisters; although the letters received from them made

her occasionally doubt whether difference of educa-tion would not prevent any similarity of taste and feeling between them. This doubt amounted to a painful certainty, when, after an absence of three years, she paid a long promised visit to the Priory. It had been anticipated with delight for weeks beforehand, and every passing cloud of distrust had been driven from her mind, as something unkind in herself, and unjust to her family; but when a week had been spent under her father's roof, and she had watched the tone and temper exhibited in her sisters' every-day life, the fond illusion was dispelled; and she was forced to acknowledge, with bitter disappointment, that the retirement of Farleigh afforded her infinitely greater sources of happiness than the comparative dissipations of her home. Perhaps the effect of this visit on Gertrude's mind might have been different, if Edith had been of an age to be her companion; but she was then only fourteen, and not yet out of the school-room, and it was impossible to foresee the circumstances which contributed afterwards to form her character; and Gertrude returned to her aunt, with the belief that there existed a barrier between herself and her sisters, far more real than any which outward separation could occasion. In her mother she had found warm feelings, but a mind so inferior to her own that there was scarcely a subject on which they could converse in common; and in her father she had met a proud worldly man, who saw in his children only the reflection of his own imaginary consequence, and thought but little of Gertrude when he discovered that she possessed neither beauty nor showy accomplishments, which might bring credit on himself. And yet, in spite of all these drawbacks, Gertrude still dwelt upon the recollection of her home, not indeed with pleasure, but with an interest deeper than she could feel for any

other spot, however associated with enjoyment. Her aunt's age and illness were constantly before her, warning her that the time would probably soon come when she must return to it; and even without this thought, the very names of father, mother, sisters, and brother, awakened visions of happiness which she could not persuade herself it would be impossible to realise.

Two years had elapsed after her first unsatisfactory visit to the Priory, when Gertrude was again recalled from Farleigh by the sudden and most alarming illness of her father. He had been dining with a party of friends, when he was seized with an apoplectic fit, from which it was at first thought he could not possibly recover; and although he partially regained his recollection, his mind was very much broken, and after lingering for about a week he expired; awakening, by his unexpected loss, feelings of sympathy and regard, which had but seldom been accorded to him during his life. Every one exclaimed: "How dreadful!" "How distressing!" "Poor Mrs Courtenay! how much she will suffer:" but few dwelt for more than an instant upon the awfulness of the event, which had thus summoned a fellow creature, engrossed in the pursuits of the world, to the tremendous presence of his Maker. If Gertrude had known her father better, the trial would have been much more severe; but being ignorant of his habitual tone of mind, she could only listen to the stories which were repeated of his honourable conduct and occasional benevolence, and trust that her own judgment had been mistaken, and that these passing acts of virtue were really signs of that inward purity of heart which God requires. Mr Courtenay's fortune had always been considered equal to the style in which he lived; by some it was reported to be two thousand a year, by others three, and some even magnified it to four

or five; and much wonder had been expressed that with such ample means he should have chosen to educate his only son for the bar. But the event of his death proved that in this Mr Courtenay had acted the part of a prudent though selfish father. He had lived much beyond his income, and he well knew it; but he could not consent to diminish one iota of his consequence in the eye of the world; and therefore he still kept his carriage, and horses, and paid his annual visit to the metropolis, and vied with his more wealthy neighbours in the splendour of his country establishment; and contenting himself with providing for his wife and daughters, left his son with no expectations beyond those which were derived from high talents and the probability of success in his profession. To many young men upon their first entrance into life, this might have appeared a hardship; but Edward Courtenay, fresh from the excitement of college honours, and longing for future distinctions, was satisfied with the knowledge that his father's death would make no very material alteration in the comfort of his mother and sisters; and considered his own situation merely an additional stimulus to exertion. Even his dreams of wealth, and his projects of benevolence, received but a momentary check; for his expectations had never been great, and to a mind so ardent and energetic, the hope of gaining riches and honour by his own efforts, and then devoting them all to good, was more alluring than the prospects of the most splendid hereditary fortune.

His wishes, however, were not destined to be fulfilled. The wealth denied by his father's extravagance was bestowed from another source; and about two years after Mr Courtenay's death, his son found himself, by the unexpected death of his cousin Colonel Courtenay of Allingham, and of his only child, a

boy about six years old, the possessor of the family estate, and a fortune reported to be six thousand a year. At an earlier period, Edward's feelings at this sudden change might not have been altogether unmixed with alloy; but four years' experience of the difficulties attendant upon a barrister's life had somewhat deadened his enthusiasm. His imagination still pictured the honours that might be gained in his profession, but his expectations of attaining them were less vivid, and the necessity of daily economy made him turn from his former visions of benevolence, as from childish dreams, which it was in vain to imagine could ever be put in practice. At such a moment, therefore, when the first bitterness of that "hope deferred" which is the portion of all at some period of their lives was just beginning to be felt, the relief afforded by the alteration of his circumstances was as great as it was unforeseen.

Had the choice been granted him, he would have preferred the acquisition of fortune by some other means; but his acquaintance with his cousin had been merely that of common courtesy; and his regret for the extinction of the elder branch of the family was soon overpowered by the brilliant prospect opened before him. Six thousand a year to one who, but a few days previous, would have considered six hundred amply sufficient for the gratification of every ordinary wish, was an inexhaustible mine of wealth; and, for the first week, Edward revelled in day dreams of enjoyment and generosity, for which even the riches of Crœsus would scarcely have sufficed.

But, with time and consideration, came the usual concomitant evils of a large accession of fortune. Lawyers, relations, tenants, and dependents, flocked around him, all clamorous for attention; and, at the expiration of a month, a serious doubt arose in his mind, whether his new position would indeed be the

bed of roses which fancy had so fondly pictured. A second month not only converted the doubt into a certainty, but brought with it also the conviction that his wealth was not what the world believed it. The family failing of the Courtenays,—the fear of the world's ridicule, and the corresponding love of the world's applause,—had operated to its fullest extent upon his predecessors at Allingham. That which they were reported to possess, they felt themselves bound to expend. To own that there was a necessity for retrenchment, would have been to lower their consequence in the eyes of their fellow creatures; and as Mr Courtenay of the Priory had acted on a small scale, so had his cousin, Colonel Courtenay of Allingham, acted on a very large one. The family estates had become every year more and more encumbered; and the income, which was believed to be six thousand a year, was not in reality more than two. Unhappily for Edward, he had had but a slight experience of the fearful evils arising from ostentation. His father's conduct had produced no visible effect upon the happiness of his mother and sisters; his own disappointment had been comparatively trifling; whilst his cousin's extravagance, though at first startling, was productive of even less apparent evil. Possibly, if any friend had been near to suggest the real motives of their actions, Edward might have been more alive to the similar defect, which, unknown to himself, existed in his own character; but, as it was, he, too, yielded to what he considered the necessity of keeping up appearances, and with a secret resolve of redeeming all that others had lost through extravagance by his own strict attention to economy, he carefully kept the fact of his disappointment from his relations and friends, and suffered himself to be congratulated by all, as the possessor of a property of nearly three times its real value. To one person

alone, besides his lawyers, the actual state of his affairs was confided, with a strict promise of secrecy, and this was his sister Edith; but her knowledge of the world was too slight to enable her to advise him as to his future conduct; and the reason which he adduced for concealment was so plausible, and her reverence for his opinion so profound, that she could not doubt the propriety of his decision. It certainly did appear unbecoming to publish to the world the follies of a near relation, from whom so much wealth had been derived; and, with Edward's prudence and strength of resolution, it might be possible for him, in a few years, to recover the ground that had been lost, and be in reality what he now was only in appearance. And when once the past had been retrieved, the same habits of simplicity and carefulness would enable him to indulge, to the utmost, his plans for the good of others; and as he said this, Edward convinced himself of his own sincerity, by sketching the rough outline of a new church to be built on Torrington Heath, with a large school-room adjoining, and some picturesque alms-houses in the distance. Edith was quite satisfied. It was clear that wealth had made no change in her brother; he still retained the noble, generous mind, and the high religious principle, which had first attracted her admiration, and afterwards mainly influenced her conduct; and the only difference perceptible, was in the enlargement of his schemes of usefulness. And Edward was equally contented. Possessed of talent, feeling, and energy, he had passed through his college life with the esteem both of his companions and his superiors; his tutors had been men of real goodness; his friends chosen from amongst the élite of the University; he had been peculiarly guarded from temptation, and the weakness of his own heart was a lesson still to be learnt; or, if an occasional misgiving

as to the strength of his moral courage crossed his mind, it vanished before the brightness of those day dreams of the future which made him overlook the duties of the present. His sister Charlotte had indeed spoken the truth, when she said that he was not consistent; but it was a truth which few but herself would have discovered. It required all her insight into character, and, perhaps, likewise, a certain coldness of feeling not liable to be led astray by sympathy, to discover that Edward sometimes mistook wishes for actions, and gazed upon the promised land of holiness, till he forgot the struggles and the toils of the wearisome wilderness which must be passed before it could be attained. In the present instance, his self-deception, if such it could be called, was complete; and when he left Allingham with the intention of spending a few months in London, his last words to Edith were a repetition of the plans of strict economy which he intended to practise on his return. Charlotte, perhaps, would have inquired why they were not acted upon at once; why the same overgrown establishment of servants (who, it was known, had cheated their master at every opportunity) was still kept; why the same array of hunters and dogs was still to be seen; and, above all, why a person, whose professed object was retrenchment, should voluntarily choose to expose himself to the temptations of a London season. But Edith's confiding disposition shielded her from every doubt; and, amidst the annoyances of her home, her mind still dwelt upon the thought of her brother, as upon the first and greatest of earthly blessings. It was to him, therefore, even more than to her absent sister, that she looked for comfort. Gertrude's letters, indeed, were delightful, and her interest in the most minute details of home made Edith forget how little she had actually known of it; but no such intercourse could equal the

charms of Edward's daily sympathy and affection; and as Edith walked slowly from the school, she began to reckon the weeks, and even the days, which must elapse before his promised return, as eagerly as a child calculates the approach of its holidays. Engrossed in her own thoughts, she passed the gate of Elsham parsonage, without recollecting that it was necessary to give an account of her morning's occupations to Mrs Grantley; and would probably have forgotten it altogether, if the approach of the person whom, of all others in the neighbourhood, she least desired to meet, had not awakened her from her reverie. The lady, who advanced quickly towards her, was of that doubtful age which is sometimes expressed as being "no age." Her fawn-coloured silk dress, satin mantilla, and Tuscan bonnet, with its drooping white feather, had been adjusted with every attention to that which might be most becoming; and, at a little distance, her light step, and not ungraceful figure, would have justified the belief that she was very young; but, on a nearer approach, the faded brilliancy of her complexion destroyed the illusion. The expression of her countenance was as little to be depended on as the youthfulness of her figure; for the smile upon her lips was contradicted by the keenness of her small, dark eyes; while the easy suavity of manner, which at first was alluring, excited, upon maturer observation, a suspicion that it was intended as a mask for feelings not meant for inspection. Edith's first impulse was to retrace her steps, but the motive would have been too obvious; and, earnestly wishing herself in Mrs Grantley's drawing-room, she hastened her steps, hoping to be allowed to pass with only a bow of recognition. She was not, however, so fortunate;—a hand was extended to greet her; and the lady's voice, in the blandest, softest of tones, expressed the utmost plea-

sure at their meeting, and then proceeded to ask after the health of her dear mother and sisters, and her absentee brother, as if the whole happiness of the speaker depended upon the information. Edith's answers were short, almost abrupt;—she was obliged by Miss Forester's inquiries, her mother was tolerable, her sisters pretty well, and her brother expected in about a fortnight; he had been at Hastings for the last six weeks, and was now in London on business; —and trusting that this account would be sufficient, Edith would have passed on, but she was again prevented.

"You are in a hurry, I see, my dear Miss Courtenay; some errand of kindness, no doubt, as usual; but you really must spare me one moment,—on such an occasion you must allow one of your oldest friends to offer her congratulations;" and Miss Forester, fixing her eyes upon Edith, as if determined to discover the slightest change of countenance, continued, "It is a delightful prospect for you,—such a good family; so highly connected, and so fashionable; and the young lady the belle of the season. I can imagine nothing more satisfactory in every way. Happily for your brother, money is no object, or perhaps—"

"Really!" exclaimed Edith, with a sudden perception of what must be intended, "you are under some very great mistake. You allude, I suppose, to some reports you have heard of my brother's marriage; we hear such constantly, but in this instance you seem to be much better acquainted with the circumstances than myself."

"Of course," replied Miss Forester, with a peculiar smile, "near relations always are ignorant of these matters. There is considerable pleasure in a little mystery."

"Not to me," said Edith; "I never can endure mystery, and there can be none now, for there is no secret."

"Indeed! I must have been strangely misinformed, but you may trust me entirely. I am aware that family reasons may render secrecy expedient; and I am almost as 'au fait' at keeping my countenance as yourself. I promise you not to name the subject since you seem so much to dislike it."

Edith felt extremely provoked: "I can have no wish in a case of which I am ignorant," she said; "if you will do me the favour to mention the report you have heard, I will give you full authority to contradict it."

"But that is so absurd. I really cannot bring myself to repeat what you ought to have known a week since; my cousin writes me word that the affair has been all but settled for at least that time."

"What affair?" said Edith; "you are still speaking enigmas."

"Oh! this marriage with Miss Howard—the beautiful Miss Howard—whom all the London world have been raving about: I see there is a little consciousness of guilt in you. It is impossible but that your brother must have named his intentions to his own relations."

"My brother would have named his intentions assuredly, if there had been any to name," said Edith, with a slight haughtiness of tone. "I am aware that he is acquainted with Miss Howard, for he frequently mentions being at her father's house; and once or twice he has noticed her style of beauty; but perhaps you will assure your correspondent, that this, at present, is the full extent of his intimacy or his interest. It is due both to himself and the lady to contradict the report as soon as possible."

"Certainly, since you wish it, it shall be done; but I could hardly have supposed the subject an unpleasant one. Nothing apparently could be more natural or desirable."

Edith did not reply to the remark, but only made

a few common-place observations on the beauty of the weather, and then saying that she should be too late for luncheon, coldly wished Miss Forester good morning. There was now a fresh subject for her meditations, but her thoughts dwelt more upon the civil curiosity evinced during the conversation, than upon the conversation itself. Reports of the kind were so common as to be mere matters of course; and Edith had entirely overcome the awkward denial, and hesitating tone, with which at first she had endeavoured to put a stop to them. With the certainty in her own mind that nothing would induce Edward to marry for several years, the credulity of her acquaintances was rather amusing than annoying; and Miss Forester's congratulations would have been received with total indifference, but for the manner in which they were offered.

CHAPTER II.

"You have been taking advantage of this fine weather, I hope, sir," said Miss Forester, when she entered her father's drawing-room, just before dinner was announced. The observation was addressed to a tall, sallow-complexioned, grey-haired man, whose prominent forehead, and piercing eye, betokened high intellect, as plainly as his compressed lips, and stiff, almost cold manner, indicated reserve. His age it would have been difficult to guess. At the first glance, he would have been pronounced old, decidedly on the verge of seventy; but a nearer observation would have subtracted at least ten years from the supposition. It was not time alone which had whitened his hair, and sunk deep furrows in his cheek, but care, and thought, and the turmoil of life, and the exposure to a sultry climate. There were no signs of age in the quickness of his eye, the keenness of his remarks, or the deep full tones of his voice; while the calmness of his ordinary manner, though by some mistaken for the insensibility of one to whom long experience has rendered all things unexciting, was but the result of the habitual check placed by necessity and principle upon feelings which in youth had been nearly uncontrollable.

"I have been walking about the village for an hour or two," was his reply to Miss Forester's insinuating remark; insinuating, rather from its tone than its purport.

"I am so rejoiced to hear you say so, for I had great fears that you might have been too fatigued to venture beyond the garden. Did you go far?"

The question was not answered, when Miss Forester, with great *empressement*, turned to a gentleman who had just made his appearance, and insisted upon his sympathising with her happiness in finding that Mr Dacre was able to take so much exercise.—"I am sure, papa, you will be as surprised as I am. We shall have no fear now for Mr Dacre's amusement."

There was a pause, in expectation of a compliment. Mr Dacre drily remarked, that the neighbourhood was very beautiful; but whether it had really afforded him any gratification, it would have been impossible from his tone to decide.

"We shall discuss the beauties of scenery more at our ease in the dining-room," said General Forester, a tall, portly man, with a pompous humility of manner, as a servant entered to announce that dinner was on the table. "No one expects a hungry man to be enthusiastic in any thing but the praises of fish and soup, Maria. Not that I can hope, Dacre, you will find any thing to admire in that way with us. We are very plain, humble people in our style of living; you must have seen that yesterday."

Mr Dacre was provokingly silent: even the recollection of the French entremêts and patés, the curry and mulligatawny on which the whole skill of the General's cook had been expended, excited nothing more than a grave, almost melancholy smile. He was as insensible to the charms of the table, as to the loveliness of nature,—at least so thought Miss Forester; and she determined to explore his taste in another direction.

Why there should be so much anxiety upon this subject, might possibly have excited the wonder of the ignorant; but a slight insight into Mr Dacre's history would have solved the problem. Mr Dacre was Miss Forester's uncle by marriage,—a sufficient motive for all ordinary attentions; but he was also

in ill health, and nothing could be more natural or right than the endeavour to soothe his feelings, and charm away the sense of suffering. Above all, he was rich, and if other inducements had been of no avail, there was something in the contemplation of wealth which excited Miss Forester's sympathy and interest to the utmost. In the present instance, there was an especial reason for exertion. Mr Dacre was but just returned from India, broken in constitution by the enervating effects of the climate, and broken in spirit by grief for the loss of his wife and two children. In all human probability his own life would not be long spared, and then came the important question, who was to inherit his property.

Mrs Forester had been Mrs Dacre's youngest and favourite sister, and in default of nearer ties, it seemed natural to suppose that her family would be chosen as his heirs. But there were too many instances on record of the injury done to near connexions by the plausible attentions of strangers, and both Miss Forester and her father were too sensible of the value of the interests at stake, to allow any unnecessary time to intervene before taking some steps for securing them. Mr Dacre was invited to the Grange almost immediately upon his arrival in England. His reception was cordial and affectionate, even beyond what circumstances demanded; and he was pressed to consider General Forester's house his home, as entirely as he might have done if his sister-in-law had been still living to welcome him. All this was very common; so common as to be rather suspicious; and although the General's blunted feelings induced him to believe that nothing more was required to win Mr Dacre's heart, except perhaps a little attention to his appetite, and a few inquiries after his health, Miss Forester thought very differently. Her hopes rested upon the daily evidences of consideration, the actions,

and not the words, which insensibly soften the most obdurate heart; and which would, she was convinced, produce in time their full effect upon Mr Dacre, notwithstanding the alarming fence of cold reserve with which he seemed to repel them. Miss Forester knew that her manner was soft, her voice melodious, and she believed that her conversation was agreeable. From childhood she had believed herself a very fascinating person, and this not merely from the consideration of her own perfections, but from the positive assurances of relations and friends. Time had produced no change in her early self-appreciation. It had deadened the brilliancy of her complexion, and marred the smoothness of her skin, but its effects were visible in no other way, and, at five-and-thirty, Miss Forester trusted as much to her powers of pleasing as she had done at eighteen; and in some degree justly. The only mistake lay in thinking that she had ever really possessed them; in believing that suavity of manner could compensate for an uncharitable temper, and that external refinement could conceal the vulgarity of a low worldly mind. Yet it was a delusion worthy of compassion, for it had been fostered by education and society. The loss of her mother when she was about twelve years of age had deprived her of the only friend likely to raise her standard of excellence, and from that time she had been surrounded by fawning dependents and relations, who poor themselves, looked upon wealth and fashion as the great objects of existence, and who, if they could not attain the reality, contented themselves with the semblance. She had lived in an atmosphere of pretension, and every thought and feeling had been tainted by it; and from the time when, as a young girl, she adorned herself with mock jewels, and rejoiced in the success of the deception, to the period of her introduction to Mr Dacre,

the same desire had been the ruling motive of her actions,—that of making the greatest possible show in dress, ornaments, opinions, and virtues, with the least possible expenditure of money and trouble. But neither skill nor energy was lacking when the occasion demanded; and now, carefully and thoughtfully, Miss Forester pursued the conversation, in the hope of gaining that knowledge of Mr Dacre's tastes, without which all her efforts at pleasing must be useless.

"Which way did your rambles lead you to-day, sir? Hardly, I suppose, to the Roman hill, though there is such a splendid view from the top."

"No, I was too tired to attempt it; it is rather beyond a sick man's stroll."

"But you must go there now, whilst the fine weather lasts. We will order the carriage to-morrow, at any hour you choose to name, and then we can drive to the foot of it, and walk up."

"Thank you. I shall be glad to see it again; I used to find some amusement in tracing out the line of the encampment."

It was a delightful hint for Miss Forester. Mr Dacre must be an antiquarian; and immediately, with the most simple, childlike professions of ignorance, she entered eagerly into the subject, asking the names of the most celebrated Roman stations, and begging for a minute description of the different trenches and circumvallations. But again she was foiled. Mr Dacre knew little of the subject, and was only interested in the spot from association. Antiquities therefore were dropped.

"I think you will find Allingham Park a pleasant distance when you do not feel equal to a regular walk. In the summer it is delightful to sit under the trees, reading; and the Courtenays have always been such intimate friends of ours, that we are perfectly at home there, and do just as we like."

"Mr Courtenay is absent, I think," said Mr Dacre.

"Yes, in London, but his sister told me to-day that he would return in about a fortnight."

"He is not much of a sportsman, willingly to lose the beginning of September."

"No," replied Miss Forester, with a smile, "it is said that his occupation at this moment is rather more exciting than partridge shooting."

"Then the report is true, Maria," said the General. "I only hope young Courtenay will keep up things in as good a style as the Colonel. He ought to do it, with his income."

"His sister Edith professes ignorance," replied Miss Forester, "but every one knows what the denial of a near relation means."

"And what does it mean?" asked Mr Dacre gravely. The tone was rather startling, and there was a pause before the answer.

"Of course I don't mean to say always, but generally speaking it is;—I know, but I don't choose to tell."

"Therefore you do not believe Miss Courtenay's words?" said Mr Dacre.

"That is so very severe, my dear sir; I only meant that I put my own interpretation upon them."

"Oh!" was the only reply, and it was completely baffling to Miss Forester's wishes, for it was an "Oh" peculiar to Mr Dacre. It expressed neither pleasure nor pain, neither assent nor dissent, neither surprise nor indifference—yet that it had some hidden meaning, was evident from the frequency with which it was used, and the silence with which it was invariably followed.

"I can scarcely suppose my cousin to have been misinformed," continued Miss Forester. "She says that the marriage was told her as a settled thing, by

Miss Howard's intimate friend; and I think she mentions next month as the time fixed for the wedding."

"The wonder is," said the General, "that young Courtenay has not married before this. I should have imagined the very first thing he would have thought of, on coming into his fortune, would have been a wife."

"He is so fastidious," replied Miss Forester; "nothing but a first-rate piece of excellence would satisfy him; though how he has made fashion and seriousness agree, in his present choice, it is difficult to understand."

"What do you mean by seriousness?" asked Mr Dacre, rousing himself from an apparent fit of abstraction.

Miss Forester felt anxious. She had never been in the habit of explaining her words, and yet upon this definition what important consequences might depend? Mr Dacre might be serious himself: nothing, indeed, was more probable, considering that he had arrived at the mature age of sixty, and had lately lost his wife and two children. Her answer, therefore, was most carefully worded—

"I suppose different people mean different things by the same word. My notion of seriousness is when persons stay at home a good deal, and talk about schools and poor people, and say that they like reading sermons. I may be wrong, but that, I believe, is the general idea."

"Perhaps so. Are Mr Courtenay's relations generally considered serious?"

"His mother is not considered any thing, and his two elder sisters are just like every one else; but the youngest is the counterpart of her brother, and there is another, living with an aunt, who they say has the same turn."

Miss Forester believed that she had so expressed herself as to give no impression of her own feelings; but even a single intonation of voice will betray volumes to a practised ear. Mr Dacre needed no further explanation of his niece's sentiments on the subject of seriousness.

"It is a great change for so young a man," said the General. "Six thousand a year is a magnificent fortune for a briefless barrister."

"Not briefless, papa," observed Miss Forester. "Every one said that he was succeeding astonishingly well."

"So they did, but what is a barrister's succeeding? merely the difference between a crust of bread and starvation, at least for the first half dozen years. Edward Courtenay is the most fortunate man I know."

"What did you say his fortune was?" asked Mr Dacre, with a greater appearance of interest than he had hitherto shown.

"Six thousand a year, decidedly; it may be more."

Mr Dacre looked a little astonished, but the expression was only momentary. If he had any reason for doubting General Forester's assurances, he concealed it under his safe monosyllable—"oh!"

"I should have gained more information as to the wedding," said Miss Forester, "if I had met either of the other sisters. Jane tells everything from not knowing how to keep it, and Charlotte from not thinking it worth while; but Edith is impenetrable."

"A valuable quality in a woman," observed Mr Dacre.

"Yes, certainly, most valuable. No one esteems it more than myself; but there is a manner—some people have a much more agreeable way of being silent than others; and they say—however, one must not speak ill of one's neighbours—but I shall not envy Edith Courtenay's husband."

"What relation was Colonel Courtenay to the present Mr. Courtenay?" asked Mr Dacre, seemingly unmindful of Miss Forester's remarks.

"Rather a distant cousin," replied the General; "but the elder branch of the family has dwindled to nothing of late years. Colonel Courtenay certainly was a splendid man—kept the first table in the county—he married a daughter of Sir Henry Vivian's—I think you must remember her—a poor, weak, sickly creature, who died a few years afterwards. They had some girls who never lived long; but the little boy appeared quite strong till he fell from his pony, and injured himself, and so brought out all his lurking maladies."

"Was Colonel Courtenay a prudent man?" inquired Mr Dacre.

"As prudent, I suppose, as he had any occasion to be. I believe he gambled a little, as a young man, but I never heard of his doing it latterly. There was only this one child to be careful for, or I dare say he might have lived differently."

"You forget the elections, papa," said Miss Forester; "he spent enormous sums in them."

"You can scarcely call that extravagance; he only did what his ancestors had done for years and years before him. The Courtenays of Allingham always represented the county, and so will Edward of course."

"But," observed Miss Forester, "Mr Vivian will not give up his seat; and I should think Mr Courtenay would hardly choose to oppose a family connexion."

"Why not? one is a whig and the other a tory. Depend upon it, Vivian would have no chance if Edward Courtenay were to come forward. The seat has always gone with the property, and half the people who voted for Vivian only did it because they

disliked Lord Montford. Vivian is not a popular man, and never will be."

"But have you not often heard Mr Courtenay rave against the excitement and wickedness of a contested election?" inquired Miss Forester.

Mr Dacre again looked interested. "Do you think so young a man could withstand the temptation of a seat in Parliament?" he asked.

"No," replied the General; "neither he nor any one else in his position; and why should he?"

"Certainly," observed Miss Forester, with a soft smile, under which lurked an expression of a very different nature, "it is a delightful thing for high-principled people, when duty and inclination go together. I suppose it might be possible to persuade Mr Courtenay to stand for the county, as a matter of duty. I have heard him discourse most eloquently on the responsibilities of a legislator."

"Yes," replied Mr Dacre, more earnestly than usual, "the duties are most important."

"You would feel them to be so if you were in my place," said the General. "The first thing I shall urge upon Edward Courtenay, when he is in Parliament, will be the reduction of taxation: if something is not done, we shall all be ruined."

"Your words will have very little effect, I am afraid, sir," answered Miss Forester. "Mr Courtenay's favourite hobby is the improvement of the manufacturing districts; he harangues upon it as if he were making a speech upon the hustings, and everything else is secondary in his eyes."

"That was all very well when he was living upon bread and cheese in his chambers in London. Taxation was nothing to him then; he had nothing to be taxed for; but he will feel now that philanthropy is rather an expensive amusement."

"For a person with six thousand a year?" said Mr Dacre, in a tone of quiet irony.

Miss Forester saw instantly that her father was upon dangerous ground. Common-place as the conversation had been, it had yet given her some idea of her uncle's principles; and she perceived that the utmost tact would be required to prevent a collision between him and her father. Not that General Forester's sentiments were such as would shock the world in general: on the contrary, he was what would be called a sensible, good-hearted man; rather fond of eating and drinking, yet not so as to be positively ungentlemanly; rather selfish, but not more so than his neighbours; rather careless in his way of speaking of religion, yet very constant at church, and as benevolent as he said he could afford to be. If his standard of virtue were a low one, it was his own concern; and, at any rate, he had the credit of acting up to it; and, if not very strict in his life, he had the charity to be lenient to the faults of others. Perhaps the leading feature of his character was a paltry ambition—the desire of bringing himself into notice as a politician, though his fortune would not admit of his attempting anything beyond the being chairman at an election committee. It was his object, but one which he had never yet attained; and his positive assertion that Edward Courtenay would ultimately be in Parliament, might arise from the hope that, under such circumstances, he should, from his long acquaintance with him, become his adviser, and a very influential person. What Mr Dacre's opinions were could not as yet be decided, but Miss Forester felt that they were not such as she was accustomed to; and during the remainder of dinner she carefully checked every allusion to subjects of more than surface interest, reserving any further attempts at discovering Mr Dacre's character, to the more favourable opportunity of a tête-à-tête.

CHAPTER III.

Miss Forester's gossip was repeated by Edith to her mother and sisters without exciting any greater surprise in their minds than it had done in hers. It was amusing, but nothing more. Yet, so strange is the power of a positive assertion, even when we have the strongest evidence for its contradiction, that Edith could not restrain a certain impatient curiosity when the letter bag was placed on the table the following morning; and the search after the mislaid key, with the difficulties of the patent lock, had seldom before been so provoking.

"It is Edward's handwriting!" she exclaimed, as her quick eye caught part of the direction of a letter, nearly concealed by a newspaper. "Mamma, it is for you—do open it."

"Edith believes Miss Forester's nonsense, I am sure," said Charlotte.

"That would be too absurd," replied Edith. "I am not more eager than usual."

"Conscience doth make cowards of us all," said Charlotte. "I never said you were eager; but you know you were. Here is another letter from Gertrude; will not that excite your interest too?"

Edith, without answering, began looking for her mother's spectacles.

"They are in my room, dear," said Mrs Courtenay, "in the lower tray of the inner drawer of my bureau—the oak bureau, I mean. Don't you disarrange my things, though."

But Mrs Courtenay's injunctions were disregarded. Even the power of the Fairy Order herself could not

have withstood the rapidity of Edith's movements, and in less than a minute she returned; the spectacles were properly adjusted, and the seal was slowly broken. Edith watched her mother's countenance as she read, and saw directly that the contents of the letter were unusual.

"Let me have it, dear mamma," she exclaimed. "You never can decipher Edward's writing."

"No, my dear, no," replied Mrs Courtenay; "it is impossible. But it can't be true—he is only joking."

"What can't be true, mamma? Do tell us; we really are anxious."

"He writes so very badly," said Mrs Courtenay. "H—no; it is not an H; it must be a C. C-o-w—Coward."

"Dear, dear mamma," said Edith, her impatience becoming every instant more painful, "if you would only let me have it——"

"Stop, my dear, I shall tell it in a moment; but he ought not to have left school when he did; I told his poor father so. Coward—it is Coward! Miss Coward, of Oakhampton Court."

"Howard!" exclaimed Edith, who saw directly the confirmation of Miss Forester's intelligence.

"So it is," replied Mrs Courtenay. "Edward is going to be married to Miss Howard. Edith, you must read it all over to me again, for I cannot quite make out what he means."

Edith eagerly seized the letter, but her voice trembled as she began, and she was obliged to yield the task to Charlotte, who, not sharing her sister's anxiety, read with perfect composure.

"My dearest Mother,

"You must, I am sure, have been expecting to hear from me for some time; for I have allowed my

usual writing day to pass without giving you any information as to my movements. The fact is, that my mind has been so occupied with a subject of engrossing interest, that I could not turn to ordinary matters, and yet I was unwilling to mention my hopes, until I could tell you that they were likely to be realised. After this preamble, I trust it will not be a matter of astonishment to you to learn, that I have, after very serious consideration, made an offer of my hand to Miss Howard, the daughter of Mr Howard, of Oakhampton Court, in Warwickshire—a gentleman of considerable fortune, and highly connected, with whom I have lately become very intimately acquainted at Hastings. I need scarcely express to you the great happiness I experienced on receiving this morning a letter containing the acceptance of my proposals; and my only desire now is, to obtain your sanction to a step which promises so much for my future life. It would be absurd in me to attempt a description of one in whom I feel such a deep interest, but I am sure you will believe that my choice has been the result of a very close observation of character, and a firm persuasion that with no other person whom I have yet seen should I have an equal chance of happiness. Situated as I am, it was almost necessary that I should marry; and I look forward to the friendship of my sisters and my dear Laura as a source of infinite comfort to us all. It was indeed of my own family that I principally thought when first I decided upon this important step; for with your ill health, it will be far better for my sisters to depend upon a sister-in-law to take them into society, than to be indebted, as they otherwise must be, to strangers; and Allingham will be a much greater source of enjoyment to them now, than it could have been when inhabited only by a bachelor brother. I shall expect your answer with the

greatest anxiety, though I have not really any doubt of your approbation. Perhaps it will please you to know that Miss Howard is idolised in her own family, and considered the belle of the season. The first, however, is the only thing which is really of consequence. I do not write to my sisters to-day, knowing that they will hear everything from you, but I shall depend upon Edith's services as bridesmaid, and either Jane or Charlotte besides. Laura will be anxious to become acquainted with you all as soon as possible, and when our arrangements are made, my sisters can spend a few days with me in London, and then proceed to Oakhampton.

"The postman's bell is ringing: I have only time to add my best love to my sisters and yourself, and my earnest entreaties that you will write by return of post.

"Ever, my dearest mother,
"Most affectionately yours,
"EDWARD COURTENAY.

"P.S.—Laura attained her eighteenth year the day before yesterday; so that she will be a most suitable companion for dear Edith. You will not expect any increase of wealth to the family, when I tell you that Mr Howard has seven children to provide for, and six of them sons; but happily this is a matter of no consequence to any of us. I must decide, when my sisters come, about new furnishing the drawing-room at Allingham, and perhaps the library."

There was a moment's pause after Charlotte had finished, which she was the first to break.

"Miss Forester was right then. How she will glory in having heard the news before us!"

"It is very sudden," said Jane. "Love at first sight, I suppose."

"No," replied Charlotte; "it was a subject of

very serious consideration, decided on principally from regard to his family. I do like to see people deceiving themselves, especially when they do it as perfectly as Edward. What do you say, Edith?"

But Edith had left the room, and was spared the renewal of the preceding day's observations.

"I do highly estimate disinterested fraternal affection," said Charlotte, "it is so rare. Most brothers marry to please themselves; every brother, in fact, that I ever heard of before, has done it—but Edward is a solitary, glorious instance of self-sacrifice."

"You are not sorry that he is going to be married, my dear, are you?" said Mrs Courtenay.

"Oh! no, ma'am, very glad. I shall like having a sister-in-law extremely; as Edward says, it will be very convenient. And I am so pleased she is beautiful. Next to being lovely one's self, the best thing I can imagine is having a lovely relation."

"It looks very smooth and pleasant," said Jane; "but if Shakspeare is true it cannot last."

"I do not see why it should not," observed Mrs Courtenay. "Edward seems quite satisfied himself, and you must own, my dears, that he writes very kindly about you."

"Very," repeated Charlotte emphatically. "Marcus Curtius was nothing to him. He had the benefit of his country as a motive for his self-devotion, but Edward is going to leap into the far more dangerous gulf of matrimony, merely to give his sisters the benefit of a chaperone."

"You are rather hard upon him, Charlotte," said Jane.

"Not hard upon his actions, only upon his words. He is perfectly right to marry, and Miss Howard may be as likely to make him happy as any one else; but why does he not say at once that he wishes to please himself, instead of making a foolish parade of consideration for us?"

"My dear Charlotte," observed her mother, "you are not kind to Edward. He never says what he does not mean."

"Indeed, mamma, that is the one thing which I am always quarrelling with him for. He does say what he does not mean; that is, he puts things in such a plausible way, that he is as much deluded as the rest of the world."

"Exclusive of his sister Charlotte," said Jane.

"Yes, exclusive of his sister Charlotte. I am convinced that I know him better than he knows himself. I can tell exactly what passed through his mind to induce him to write such a letter as that. First of all, he was desperately in love, and resolved upon making his offer; but, at the same time, a little anxious as to what we should say; and then—'his wish being father to his thought'—it struck him what a delightful thing it would be for us to go everywhere with Mrs Courtenay, instead of being indebted to the chance kindnesses of friends; and what pleasant parties and amusements we might have at Allingham, instead of the dull, family meetings that have been held there lately; and so, in about five minutes, these every-day advantages were magnified into first-rate blessings, and Edward made his offer, and gained his object, and piqued himself upon being the most affectionate brother in the world."

"And he is so, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "no one in the neighbourhood is like him."

"I quite agree with you, mamma," replied Charlotte; "and that makes it the more provoking. If he had not a great many real excellencies, one would be less angry at his mock ones."

"I don't see why you should be certain they are mock ones, in this instance," observed Jane.

"Simply for this reason. If he really thought so much of us, why did he not write to consult us?

Surely we were the best judges as to whether our happiness depended upon having society at Allingham, and a sister-in-law for a chaperone. Just ask yourself, Jane,—do you think that Edward's determination would have been for an instant shaken by finding that we disliked his marriage?"

"No," replied Jane; "but it would not be natural to expect it."

"Certainly not; but according to his own showing it ought to have been. He says that he thought of us principally, and yet he acted precisely in the way to prevent our wishes from being of any avail."

Jane smiled. "I suppose half the world would have done the same."

"No, one half would have not considered their own families at all; and the other half would have been desirous of their approbation, yet determined upon going their own way in spite of them. There are not many who have Edward's happy knack of making duty and inclination go hand in hand."

"There was no great duty at stake, in this case," said Jane.

"Perhaps not, according to the usual opinion; but Edward piques himself upon being a pattern son, scorning the ordinary modes of action; so it might have been imagined that he would have consulted his mother before he made his offer."

"Which of you will be bridesmaid?" inquired Mrs Courtenay.

"You must, Charlotte," said Jane. "The bustle and fatigue would half kill me."

"I have not the slightest objection; in fact, I shall like it very much. It will enable me to judge what sort of a choice Edward has made, by seeing Miss Howard in her own family; besides, there is something awful to me in a host of unknown connexions, who may prove a disgrace to you at any moment.

I like to know the full extent of a matrimonial calamity at once."

"It is no calamity, my dear, that I can understand," said Mrs Courtenay; "I was very happy for a great many years, and so was my mother, and I hope dear Edward will be the same."

"No one can join in the hope more cordially than I do," replied Charlotte; "but, to make the best of it, it is a sort of kill-or-cure business; however, that is not my affair: as far as I am personally concerned, I am rejoiced at it, and I shall go and take a solitary walk in the back shrubbery, for the purpose of settling what my bridesmaid's dress is to be."

"You had better consult Edith," said Jane, "for you must be dressed alike."

"Oh! no; I am the eldest, and even if I were not, Edith would be entirely at a loss to decide. I would consult her upon the pattern of cotton frocks for the school children, but nothing beyond."

"Give me my desk before you go, Charlotte," said her mother. "I must write to dear Edward directly."

"We have forgotten Gertrude," observed Jane. "You had better take her letter to Edith as you go up stairs; I dare say there is nothing very important in it. Edith's door was bolted, and when it was opened, Charlotte's careless good humour was startled at seeing traces of agitation in her sister's face. Edith did not however say any thing, but took the letter, and then, turning away, again fastened her door. Charlotte, in surprise, waited for a few minutes in the passage, irresolute as to whether it would be advisable to request admittance; but there was so little sympathy between them, that it would have been felt almost as an intrusion; and certain that Edith had some whimsical fancy with regard to her brother's marriage, Charlotte consulted her own wishes, and

went into the shrubbery. It would indeed have been impossible for her to have entered into the feelings with which Edith had received the intelligence in Edward's letter; not that she had ever supposed he would not marry eventually; on the contrary, they had often conversed upon the subject together, and built pleasant castles in the air as to the manner of life to be pursued at Allingham, and the friendship that was to subsist between Edith and her brother's wife; and in the uncertainty of Gertrude's return to her home, Edith had looked forward to the affection of a sister-in-law, as to something that was to compensate for the want of congeniality which was now so painful to her. But the idea of a sudden marriage with a fashionable London belle, effectually destroyed these bright visions; and, joined with other portions of her brother's letter, brought with it that most bitter of all feelings,—the first perception of a secret fault in one whom we have been accustomed to revere. Edward was not only Edith's dearest treasure, but he was also her guide and counsellor. His enthusiasm and high principles had given the original impulse of good to her mind, and his letters and conversation had daily strengthened it. Unknown to herself, she had believed him perfect; and now, a secret misgiving, felt long before it was acknowledged, suggested the possibility that he might have been in error. It was in vain that she owned the folly of attempting to judge before the circumstances were fully known. In vain that she accused herself of unkindness, and even selfishness, in trembling at the thought of anything that was to make him happy. One thing was certain: Edward's plans of economy, and with them his plans of benevolence, must for the present fall to the ground. Even with the best intentions, considerable expense must be incurred; and though Edith could not believe that his resolutions were for-

gotten, it was strange to find how soon they could be set aside. Love might excuse a great deal; it might induce him to see excellencies where none existed, and blind him to the probability of disappointment in a hasty marriage; but it could not completely obliterate the recollection, that without constant economy he might soon be a ruined man; and the idea of the newly furnished drawing-room, and the long upholsterers' bills, fixed itself in poor Edith's mind as firmly as that of having a fashionable sister-in-law. Unhappily, the effect produced by solitude and reflection was not one likely to conduce either to her own happiness or that of her family. The evil was but increased by consideration, and Edith's principles were as yet so new, and her feelings so warm, that she was not aware of the error which lay at the bottom of her determination to decline the office of bridesmaid; and if her sister-in-law proved, as she expected, a mere elegant, accomplished beauty, to content herself with her usual pursuits, and to depend upon Allingham as little as possible, either for comfort or pleasure. It was the resolve of a moment of pique and disappointment, made without the serious thought which should accompany most actions of our lives, and in ignorance that the first duty of a woman is to be found in the quiet, soothing influence, exerted within her narrow circle upon her own immediate relations. She believed her sister-in-law to be a person with whose principles she could have no sympathy, and did not remember that this should be an especial reason for striving to win her affection, and lead her in the right way: and feeling pained at her brother's conduct, instead of patiently submitting to events, over which, since the engagement was already formed, there could be now no control, she ran the risk of vexing, perhaps offending him, in order to avoid what she considered the insincerity of

sanctioning an act that her conscience could not entirely approve. The tone of Gertrude's letter somewhat softened her feelings. It was so gentle, so thoughtful, so full of consideration for every one at Elsham, that involuntarily Edith paused, and asked herself whether her sister's sentiments would resemble her own under similar circumstances,—whether she would not be likely to feel more calmly, and bear more patiently, the thought of Edward's weakness. But Gertrude could not be an example for her; she had never given her whole affection to her brother, and trusted and reverenced him as a superior being; and she had never looked forward to his marriage as a source of comfort amidst daily annoyances. To see an error in his conduct might be painful to her, but it could never be as trying as it was to Edith; and the character of his wife could be but of little consequence to one who had learned to depend so entirely upon herself. With a secret doubt as to the propriety of her determination, Edith put her sister's letter aside, and went to her mother to beg that she would inform Edward that it would not be in her power to comply with his request. Mrs Courtenay wondered, and inquired, and even began to urge the subject, but Edith was firm. She had little respect for her mother's judgment, and had been permitted so long to follow her own path, that the obligation of attending to a parent's wishes did not very forcibly strike her; while the arguments she brought forward to support her decision, strengthened her conviction that she was acting rightly, and soon overcame Mrs Courtenay's remonstrances. The point was at length yielded with the usual phrase,—"Well, my dear, I don't understand these things: people were very different when I was young; but you must do as you choose."

CHAPTER IV.

Edith's determination was received by her sisters with surprise, but without any wish to combat it. Jane professed it a matter of indifference what others did, as long as they did not interfere with her own comfort; and Charlotte, whose fundamental principle was, that every one was the best judge of their own actions, after expressing it as her opinion that Edith was whimsical, and that Edward would be annoyed, considered the affair settled, and easily made up her mind to go to Oakhampton alone. Edith, however, was not so indifferent. Outwardly, indeed, she was tranquil and cheerful, but her brother's next letter was looked for with anxiety, and even her disappointment as to his strength of character could not render her happy in the prospect of displeasing him. But the deed was not to be recalled; she had refused to be bridesmaid, and Miss Howard would naturally make choice of some personal friend to fill her place. It was in vain to repent of acting hastily, or to doubt whether her motives had been justifiable. Edward's anger, if excited, must be borne patiently, and she could only hope that he would trust to her affection, and not inquire too minutely into the circumstances which rendered it so impossible for her to leave home at that time; yet, even with this, Edith was not contented. It was not clear that she had been wrong; but it was not certain that she had been right. She distrusted her motives; and, as usual in such cases, Edward's letter was to decide the question; for Edith was young, and inexperienced in self-knowledge. Her most glaring faults had been seen and corrected;

but the real difficulty of a christian life—the struggle against secret sins—was just commencing. She was not yet aware of the slight self-complacency, and absence of the "charity which thinketh no evil," that had induced her to form a hasty judgment of her intended sister-in-law; and she left the goodness of her decision to be determined by its consequences, rather than by an inquiry into her own intentions. Edward's letter, when it arrived, kept her still in a state of doubt. He expressed himself much hurt at her refusal; and hinted that all other engagements should have given way to one so urgent. But he did not press his wishes. His mind was pre-occupied, and his heart full of his anticipated happiness; and two sides of his paper were filled with plans for alterations at Allingham, and descriptions of the style in which he intended to furnish, not only the drawing-room and library, but a great part of the house Edith's pride was wounded. His indifference was more galling than any irritation; and her aversion to her new sister-in-law increased. She believed that her vexation arose principally from being disappointed in Edward. Six months before his plans had been of lavish profusion in works of charity, and the most rigid self-denial in personal expenditure. If he ever married, his wife was to possess similar tastes; and yet, in one week, "the baseless fabric" of his visions had vanished. Ornamental lodges had taken the place of alms-houses; painted glass was superseded by French windows; altar-cloths and pulpit hangings had yielded to the superior charms of silk curtains and rich carpets. The alteration could not be in Edward himself—it was impossible that a taste for luxury should have sprung up in so short a time; but Miss Howard's influence must naturally be great; and, no doubt, it was to please her that Edward now gave such an exclusive attention to things which once

he had considered of little value. So Edith argued—and so she would willingly have blinded herself to the fact of her brother's weakness. But in this she did him more than justice. In his barrister's chambers, Edward Courtenay sat in his easy chair, and surrounded himself by the supposed necessaries of life, and built in imagination the most perfect church that had been erected for centuries. In his drawing-room at Allingham he reposed upon a sofa, and amused himself with books and pictures, and his church grew more splendid, and his charities more extensive. And now, he gave orders which would have accorded with a fortune double his own: and the next minute, pictured the delight he should experience in having some one to share his plans for the comfort of his tenants, and assist in distributing his benevolence. The change over which Edith grieved was a change of circumstances, not of heart.

A polite note from Mrs Howard, containing a general invitation to Oakhampton, made Edith think for a few minutes of retracting her refusal; but a letter from Edward, at the same time, told her that Miss Howard had already thought upon a friend whom she wished to supply her place. The wedding was fixed for an early day, and it would not do to propose any alterations, though Edith began to see that her feelings throughout the whole affair had not been entirely unblamable, and now that the immediate annoyance was over, she would willingly have been the first to conciliate. But the time was gone by; Edward engaged to meet his sister Charlotte in London, and Edith bade her good-bye with a heavy heart, and almost the conviction that her proper place would have been by her side.

The interest of so very important an event raised the spirits of both Mrs Courtenay and Jane, and their many maladies were occasionally forgotten in the

eagerness with which Charlotte's account of Oakhampton and its inhabitants was expected. But Edith felt that little comfort was likely to be derived from any thing that her sister might relate. She might give vivid descriptions of Miss Howard's personal appearance, and of the general style of the family; but where such a difference of opinion existed on the most important points, there could be no great dependence on the judgment; and Edith trusted as little to Charlotte's estimation of character as Charlotte did to Edith's taste in dress. Her only consolation was found in writing to Gertrude; yet even this was far from satisfactory, while one of the chief causes of uneasiness was obliged to be withheld. It seemed absurd to grieve so much over Edward's marriage when unacquainted with his wife; and the necessity for economy, of which Edith thought so much, was a fact unknown to all but herself.

The congratulations of the neighbourhood were soon added to the list of annoyances, and Edith scarcely knew which was the most painful, Miss Forester's soft flattery of her brother's perfections, and ironical praises of the self-command shown by herself on a former occasion; or Mrs Grantley's earnest declaration, that "Mr Courtenay possessed her highest esteem, and she only trusted he had found a wife worthy of him." Praise of Edward was very different from what it had been. Once it would have found a ready echo in her own opinion, but now a feeling of distrust checked her satisfaction; and her manner became so evidently constrained whenever he was mentioned, that even the most unobservant could not fail to notice it; and the gossiping morning visitors shook their heads, and looked grave, as they hoped "Mr Courtenay's marriage was approved at the Priory, but they had their doubts." But the view of Allingham was that which caused Edith the

greatest pain. The road through the park could be seen from the Priory drawing-room, and she seldom stood at the window without observing some of the workmen employed in the alterations, for which Edward had already given full directions, passing backwards and forwards; or if she failed to notice them herself, her mother was sure to call her attention to them, or Jane to remark—"What a happy thing it was that Edward was rich, for really his ideas were so magnificent, that a man with a smaller income would soon be ruined." Of what was doing Edith had not a very clear idea. Her mother and sister often drove to the house to note the progress of the work, but she resolutely kept from inquiries on their return, as tending to fix in her mind the thoughts she was most anxious to banish; and enough was heard in the ordinary course of conversation, of boudoirs, and ante-rooms, cornices, moulding, damask, silk, rosewood, and mahogany, and the other et ceteras of an upholsterer's shop, to convince her that for once Edward's dreams were about to be converted into substantial realities. From Charlotte's first letter, on her arrival in town, they found that the idea of mutual consultation as to the style of furniture had quickly passed by. Edward's impatience was too great to brook delay; and Charlotte rejoiced that she had been spared the thankless task of endeavouring to decide for a man bent upon following his own way; and said she had little doubt, from the description of what had been chosen, that Allingham would be more handsomely fitted up than any place of its size within the distance of a hundred miles.

The words sent a pang through Edith's heart, and she became more and more depressed; and feeling a difficulty in writing without restraint, she allowed the burden of the correspondence to rest with her mother and Jane; and only twice contrived to fill

"Yes, I daresay he will; though Willie's been out of work a precious long time,—but I don't complain. It's not my way to find fault,—if it was I should be better off."

Edith's patience was almost exhausted; but as she looked at the old woman's shrivelled features and bent figure, and remembered how much she had really suffered, and the warmth of heart that was concealed under so repulsive a manner, her sympathy was again excited.

"I don't think that is quite the case, Martha," she said; "at least I am sure, if you mean that my brother does not think of you, you are very much mistaken."

"May be," replied Martha, bending again over the fire, and then remaining silent.

"Come, nurse," said Edith, "I did not think you would be vexed with me to-day. I really put myself out of my way for you. I was very busy at home."

"You gets busier and busier every day," answered the old woman. "I suppose when the new lady comes to the Park, you'll be so busy that you'll never come near me."

Edith rose hastily from her seat, and was preparing to go, when Martha's heart softened.

"There, don't you be angry now, Miss Edith, I meant no offence. Sit down again, and just tell me a little about things. When is the wedding to be?"

"The day is not fixed," said Edith, reseating herself on a wooden stool by Martha's side; "but I think it will be early in the week after next."

"And you not to go to it! really it's a shame! so fond as you were of Mr Edward. Why didn't you say you would go?"

"Because I had rather not, nurse: I shall see Edward very soon here—he is to be at Allingham in about a month after his marriage."

"That's not like you," said Martha, raising her keen eyes to Edith's face. "I dare to say, now, you'd have been just as well content if he wasn't going to have such a fine new wife."

"I shall be most contented with whatever makes him most happy," said Edith, involuntarily sighing; and then she added, more gaily, "It will be a nice thing for you, nurse, to have a lady so near you. It is rather a long walk for me from the Priory, but if I lived at Allingham, I should be able to see you nearly every day."

"Tom Slater says he doesn't think I shall stay here much longer," said Martha; "but I told him I knew better than that—Mr Edward promised I never should move again—so I don't take what the neighbours say much to heart."

"I don't understand you," replied Edith: "does he think you're ill?"

"No, no, not that. Thank God! I am as strong and hearty as any of them: but the sight from my lady's new window is not so good as it would be if the cottage was away; and the chattering fellow declares Mr Edward will have it pulled down."

"There is no occasion to be afraid of that: Edward would rather have the finest view in the world spoilt, than turn you out of your home. But let me see how it comes in the way." Edith walked to the door, and saw directly that the remarkably ugly, red brick tenement stood opposite to the front of Allingham; but how much of the view was intercepted by it she could not determine.

If any one but Martha had inhabited the obnoxious dwelling, there was no doubt it would have been speedily removed; but Edward's attachment to his nurse was very sincere, and he had so often promised that she should remain in the cottage as long as he

was the owner of it, and Edith agreed with Martha in considering any change impossible.

"Tom Slater says there's no guessing how bad it looks from the new room," said Martha; "but how should he know? He can't tell pretty from ugly if he sees it in a book."

"It does come just in the way of the new window," said Edith; and she thought of her sister-in-law, and wondered whether she would be able to endure such a blot upon the prospect.

"But there's no doubt about Mr Edward's promise, is there, now?" asked Martha anxiously. "He told me I should stay here—three times he said it; the very first day I came in, that was, when my poor husband was so ill, and they turned us out of the cottage on the heath, because of the rent. I could never go to a new place in this world; if he sends me away, it will be to another."

"Don't worry yourself about it," said Edith kindly. "It is only the workmen's fancy. Edward is so good, you need not be afraid."

Martha was rather deaf, and not much alive to variations of tone, or she would have noticed the slight hesitation with which this was spoken. Not that Edward's kindness of heart was really doubted, but it was no longer so implicitly confided in; and without exactly reasoning upon her motives, Edith decided upon returning home through the Park, in order to judge for herself whether Martha Philips' cottage was as great a desight as it had been described.

CHAPTER V.

THREE weeks had elapsed since Edith last visited Allingham, and in that time the improvements had made considerable progress; but the good taste displayed in everything that Edward undertook, brought no charm to his sister's mind; for as she gazed upon the elegance and beauty which surrounded her, something in her own heart whispered that Edward's fabric of happiness was insecure. It was based upon self-gratification, not upon self-denial. A short time was sufficient to satisfy her curiosity, and to show that the offending cottage was conspicuously ugly; and after wandering over the empty rooms, and asking a few questions of the workmen, Edith sadly pursued her way homewards. The autumnal tints were just beginning to colour the foliage of the trees, adding a richer hue to the broad masses of light and shade, so peculiarly beautiful in park and forest scenery; and even Edith's melancholy reflections were beguiled, as she paused on the summit of a slight ascent, and looked back upon her brother's home. The long regular range of buildings, the portico and colonnade, the straight walks, and the formal parterres of the Italian garden, contrasted indeed curiously with the wildness of the luxuriant oaks and beeches, and the winding glades of the park; but, in the mellowed light of the afternoon sun, every object seemed harmonised in form as well as in colour, and the only impression made upon the mind was that of an abode of peace, wealth, and freedom from earthly anxieties. Edith leant against the trunk of a magnificent beech tree, near which

she had often rested with her brother to enjoy the same view; and while recalling his tones of kindness, and his warm feelings, and noble projects, reproached herself for having ever imagined the possibility of a change. That one spot brought him more vividly before her than almost any other, for it was there they had last parted; and she well remembered the delight visible in his countenance, as he pointed to the hamlet where he hoped one day to erect a church, and calculated the smallness of the sum to which he might reduce his personal expenditure, in order to obtain the necessary means; expressing, at the same time, the deepest gratitude for having been trained in habits of prudence before he had been entrusted with wealth. For the time, Edith's feelings of confidence in her brother returned, and with it the dreams which had been a constant source of enjoyment to them both. Her eye rested happily upon the distant cottages, and her imagination pictured the spire of Edward's church appearing amongst the trees, and adding to the beauty of the scenery those associations of purity and holiness, without which the loveliness of nature can afford no perfect enjoyment. A slight rustling amongst the leaves disturbed her reverie, and turning suddenly round, she perceived a gentleman, whom at first sight she believed to be unknown to her; but as he came nearer, she recognised the stranger who had lately been seen at church in General Forester's pew; and about whom so much curiosity had been excited, as almost to rival the interest of her brother's marriage. Edith had never been introduced to Mr Dacre, but they had met so frequently as scarcely to require the ceremony; and she felt little surprise when he advanced towards her, and apologised for intruding upon her brother's property, saying that permission had been given him by Mr Courtenay's friend, General

Forester, to wander over the park; and he trusted he had not presumed too far in approaching so near the house. His excuse must be the wish again to see a place which he remembered when a boy. Edith was, of course, pleased that the park should afford Mr Dacre any gratification; and was certain it would be her brother's wish that it should be open to him at all times.

"For the next month," she added, "you will be likely to retain undisturbed possession. We do not expect my brother home yet."

"I suppose, though," observed Mr Dacre, "it is a favourite walk of yours?"

"Yes," replied Edith, "I never come here without admiring it: but there are so many things to be done every day, that I seldom walk merely for pleasure."

"You should become something of an invalid, like myself," said Mr Dacre, "and take out a license from the court of conscience to kill time in the most agreeable way."

"It must be a tiresome occupation," observed Edith.

"Yes, if you really make it a pursuit: but time may die a very innocent and peaceful death in such a place as this."

"Provided one has a license," said Edith, smiling; "but it pleases me better to have no time to kill."

Mr Dacre sighed, and a passing contraction of his forehead showed some painful thoughts had been awakened. "I agree with you," he said. "I am sure one of the great secrets of happiness is to have no moment unemployed; but illness is a stern master, even to the most active."

"I hope it is not wrong," said Edith; "yet I think I would rather die than be condemned to a useless life."

"Are we the best judges of what is useful?"

replied Mr Dacre. "Don't you think we are too much in the habit of considering no actions important but obvious and exciting ones? The moment any occupation becomes a duty, even if it is merely picking straws, it ceases to be useless, and the manner in which we do it must be of infinite consequence."

Edith did not know what to reply, for she was surprised at the turn the conversation had taken. "Perhaps," continued Mr Dacre, thinking that she wished to return home, "you would allow me to walk through the park with you. I have been here a long time, and General Forester will scarcely forgive me if I keep his dinner waiting."

Edith willingly assented, feeling an unusual degree of interest in her new acquaintance; but she was too shy to renew the subject that had been dropped, and Mr Dacre did not again allude to it.

"Your brother is losing a beautiful season," he said; "I can scarcely imagine any place having charms for him like this."

Edith smiled, but it was a smile quickly succeeded by a sigh. "You would not say that," she replied, "if you were as well acquainted with his affairs as the rest of the Elsham people." She did not see Mr Dacre's face, or she might have remarked the half-serious, half-amused expression, with which he answered, "Mr Courtenay is not entirely a stranger. I have heard of his intended marriage; it is a subject of general conversation."

"Yes," said Edith, "I dare say the world is acquainted, or thinks itself acquainted, with the most minute particulars."

"Even the colour of the bridal dress," observed Mr Dacre; "and if so much is said beforehand, what will it be afterwards?"

"I shall not envy my sister-in-law's position for the first few months," continued Edith. "I don't

think women were formed for notoriety of any kind: it must always make them feel awkward and out of place."

"Happily it will only be for a few months," said Mr Dacre; "and when the excitement of the arrival is over, we may hope real happiness will begin."

"The situation seems very enviable," said Edith; "almost enough so to be alarming. Few people are permitted to enjoy uninterrupted prosperity."

"Very few; but I suspect the fault lies in themselves. The trial is too great."

"And money makes a person so independent," said Edith. "It is seldom a rich man hears truth, even from his own relations."

"Yes, perhaps that is one of its greatest evils. There is an indirect influence, though, which no one is beyond the reach of, and I think it is always more powerful than advice."

As Mr Dacre said this, they reached the park-gates; but he was plainly determined to pursue the conversation, for, unmindful of General Forester's dinner-hour, he continued his walk in the direction of the Priory.

"I don't think I quite understand you," replied Edith: "what influence do you mean?"

"Affection. A young man will often be led by a brother or a sister when he would not listen to his father or mother."

"Leave out the sisters," said Edith. "Brothers are not apt to pay much attention to them."

"Indeed, I think you are mistaken. You speak from belief; I speak from experience. The greatest blessing of my life was the example of a sister."

"Edward would think some wonderful change had taken place if I were to presume to offer him advice," said Edith, laughing.

"But advice is not the necessary form of influence,"

replied Mr Dacre. "We may safely act as drags to a wheel which is going too fast, when we should be crushed in attempting to stop it."

"Edward has chosen a drag for himself now," said Edith, with a slight sharpness of tone, which did not escape her companion's observant ear.

"Or is there but another wheel added, which may accelerate the motion?"

"Perhaps so," replied Edith. "Yet it may be dangerous for by-standers to interfere."

"Of that I can be no judge," said Mr Dacre. "My observations were only general. But I believe we often commit fatal errors from the belief that we have no influence."

There was an earnestness in his manner which struck Edith forcibly. It was so different from the tone of an ordinary acquaintance, that for an instant she fancied Mr Dacre must have had some secret meaning in his remarks; but a little reflection convinced her of the improbability of the idea. They parted at the Priory Lodge. Edith walked slowly to the house, thinking of the unusual pleasure she had experienced; and Mr Dacre stood by the gate till she was out of sight, watching her with evident interest, and then, with a sigh, retraced his steps towards the Grange.

CHAPTER VI.

"A LETTER from Charlotte at last," exclaimed Jane Courtenay, on the following morning. "Now, I suppose we shall hear all the particulars," and her eye ran rapidly over the crossed sheets; while a few of the principal subjects were enumerated. "Very busy—wedding fixed for Thursday, because of an old uncle going away. The archdeacon of some place or other to perform the ceremony—Bride's dress white silk, Honiton lace veil.—Bridesmaids to be all alike—pale blue watered silk—bonnets sent for from Paris—jewels magnificent—Edward spending a fortune—carriage the most elegant affair that can be imagined—Edward a universal favourite—told to his face that he is perfection. Slight symptoms of conceit in consequence. Tell Edith this—it will please her."

"No, indeed, you shall not tell me," exclaimed Edith, interrupting her sister. "Nothing is so provoking as to hear bits of a letter in that manner. Do let me have the satisfaction of reading it all quietly to myself."

"Nay, but you must listen to this," said Jane; "it is just in your way. All the villagers are to have a fête on the wedding-day, and Edward intends giving new frocks and bonnets to twenty of the school girls, and new jackets and hats to the same number of boys; and he talks to me about the patterns of cottons and the shape of bonnets till I begin to think the wedding dress an affair of much less consequence."

"And what is to be done at Allingham?" asked

Edith. "I should have thought Mr Howard might have provided for Oakhampton himself."

"Not when he has such a long purse and such a ready hand near, to save him the trouble," said Jane. "Let me see, there is a postscript about Allingham. Edward has written to the bailiff to provide a dinner for the tenants; and he hopes you will all go and see them enjoy themselves."

"There will be a sufficient occupation for you, Edith."

"Mrs Grantley talked about the school children," replied Edith. "I don't mean that she intended they should be feasted at Edward's expense; but she wishes them to have some pleasure to mark the day, because many of them are the children of his tenants; and I said I was sure mamma would assist."

"Poor little things!" said Mrs Courtenay. "It is hard they should not be happy one day in their lives. You arrange everything, my dear, and then tell me about it afterwards."

"It makes me ill to think of it," said Jane, yawning. "Such a quantity of trouble for such a set of dirty little creatures! What can be the good of giving them a taste for things which they will never have when they grow up? It will be long before they have tea and plum-cake again when they once leave school."

"So much the more reason that they should enjoy it now," replied Edith. "If your principle had been acted upon, Jane, we should all have been miserable children, for it is impossible to have the same pleasures at twenty that we had at ten."

"Perhaps so," said Jane, languidly. "I shall be glad when it is all over; one has lived in such a whirl lately, that none but a strong person can stand it. How I envy you, Edith—nothing seems to annoy you."

If Jane had known what was passing in her sister's mind, the words might have been unsaid. Edith had taken up the letter, and, after turning to the account of Edward's plan for the Oakhampton school, was thinking of the reasons which could induce him to consult Charlotte on such subjects rather than Miss Howard. The only explanation was in the supposition, that to the latter it was an affair of no interest; and the circumstance, though slight, contributed to strengthen Edith's prejudice. It would have been happy if some friend, wiser than herself, had been near, to caution her against a rapid judgment, even when drawn from facts; but the only person who could have advised her was Gertrude, and to her Edith had only mentioned, in general terms, a fear that Edward's marriage was hasty; and though Gertrude, in answer, had spoken of the care and consideration which might be required in the future intercourse between Allingham and the Priory, Edith did not apply the observations to herself, having no idea that she was likely to be tempted to say or do anything which would give offence.

No more letters were expected before the important one which was to announce that the marriage had taken place, and it was thought better to defer all rejoicing till the fact was positively known. There were so many wonderful stories of brides and bridegrooms dying, or quarrelling, or changing their mind, at the very last moment, that the Committee of the Elsham National School decided it would be less presumptuous to wait, and not run the risk of wishing health and prosperity to Mrs Courtenay of Allingham, when no such person might be in existence. But Edith had no fears. From the first moment, she felt that there was little hope of escape. All was easy and bright—a practical comment upon Cæsar's motto, "Came, saw, and conquered." And yet, when the

thirteenth of October arrived, and with it the expected packet from Oakhampton, her heart beat quickly; and as her eye caught the joint names at the bottom of her brother's letter, she felt even greater pain than she had anticipated.

"You will go at once to Mrs Grantley, I suppose," said Jane, when she had finished Charlotte's glowing account of the wedding—with the titled guests—and the carriage and four—and the school children—and the breakfast—and all the other et ceteras by which such events are celebrated, both by those who can, and those who cannot, afford it; "and we may as well send to Rayner, and ask him what has been settled about the dinner. I suppose we must drive to the park to look at them, but I wish Edward had let the matter rest till he came home."

"No, my dear," observed Mrs Courtenay, "that would have been quite wrong. In my days, there used to be a great deal more done. Every poor person in the parish had a dinner when I was married."

"Edward would have had enough to do in the parish of Elsham, to provide for the two thousand poor," said Jane. "I think, mamma, as you patronise the thing so warmly, you had better superintend it, and leave Edith to exercise her talents in the school feast. It will be a great relief to me if I can be left out."

"And so it would be to me," replied Mrs Courtenay, suddenly reminded of her maladies. "I thought the night before last I should have been obliged to send for Mr Humphries,—I had such a dreadful pain in my shoulder."

"Bilious, I dare say," replied Jane. "You know, mamma, you would eat pudding and macaroni at dinner."

"Mr Humphries declares it is rheumatism," said

Mrs Courtenay. "I must ask one of you to rub my shoulder for me."

"I would, if I were not obliged to go to bed early," said Jane. "Edith, you don't mind being late."

"I am obliged not to mind it," said Edith: "there is no time to do any thing in the day—but I heard you moving about till half-past twelve last night."

"Because I wanted to finish a book; and see how ill I am to-day in consequence."

"The night before, it was twelve," continued Edith; and then, seeing the angry flush on Jane's cheek, she stopped, vexed at having persisted in a disagreeable conversation—and seated herself at the table to calculate the expenses of the school feast.

"My dear," said her mother, "you are so careless. Just look, you have destroyed that nice gilt-edged paper for nothing; why will you always write from that portfolio?"

"I forgot," replied Edith; and she took up a common sheet.

"Oh! Edith," exclaimed Jane, "you are scribbling on the letter I had begun, and yesterday you did the very same thing. No one ever makes such blunders as you do."

"I did not mean any harm," said Edith; "if you had as many things to think of as I have, you would make mistakes too."

"Charity begins at home, and care ought to do the same," said Jane. "I do think you benevolent people are the most tiresome race in existence."

Edith had recourse to silence—and went to her own room, with a passing consciousness that it might be better to attend more to the general comfort of the family.

The day fixed for the dinner and the school feast was unusually fine for the season; and even Mrs Courtenay threw off her fur cloak, as she stepped

into the open carriage that was to convey her to the Park, and allowed that it might be possible to enjoy a drive in the month of October. Jane declined going, under pretence of not being able to bear the excitement, while Edith accompanied her mother with a grave countenance, to witness rejoicings in which she by no means participated. The dinner was painful; for Mrs Courtenay was so little in the habit of mixing with the poor, that she was entirely deficient in the ease and cordiality which win their affections much sooner than even words or actions. With hasty steps she passed along the different tables, repeating, as a matter of form, that "she hoped they would enjoy themselves;" and Edith lingered behind, endeavouring to efface any disagreeable impression, by inquiring minutely after the children and the invalids of the different families.

Martha Philips was present, complaining that she was too old for such grand doings, and Edith was endeavouring to soothe her, when the old nurse suddenly recollected her fears for the cottage, and began to inquire, whether Edith really thought it as ugly as she had been told; for they said, "that Mr Edward's lady came from a hard family, and she would be sure to have her own way."

"Who says? what do you mean?" asked Edith, eagerly, and bending down, that the answer might not be overheard.

"Tom Slater says he heard it from one of the London workmen who knew all about them. He was at work down in their country one winter, and a weary time he had of it; but never a bit of help from the great folks."

"Here's health and long life to Mr and Mrs Courtenay!" cried the bailiff, from the top of the table, "and we'll drink it with three times three."

Edith's heart sank within her; but she was spared

the pain of such ill-timed rejoicing, by an imploring look from her mother; who, alarmed at the prospect of the stunning noise, requested that the cheers might be deferred. A murmur of disapprobation ran round the table, and the weakness of Mrs Courtenay's nerves gained her on that day more unpopularity than the kindness of weeks could have retrieved.

The poor are seldom conscious of the existence of nerves; and any thing which shows an absence of sympathy with their feelings, is sooner resented than even the neglect of their bodily wants. This Edith knew; and, vexed and uneasy, she hastened her mother away, and, advising her to return home, walked to the school alone.

The children were all placed in order, and the tea and cake distributed; but they had waited for her, as the Queen of the Day; and she was just beginning to excuse herself for being late, when a soft voice behind her murmured, "A peculiarly interesting spectacle, this, Miss Courtenay"—Edith turned, and saw Miss Forester leaning on her uncle's arm,— "most gratifying to you it must be in every way. I dare say you will remember your feelings on this occasion to your latest moment." Of this Edith had no doubt, but whether the nature of the feelings was such as Miss Forester imagined, was another matter. "I need not introduce my uncle," Miss Forester was going to say; but she checked herself. There was a possibility that Mr Dacre might not choose to be exhibited in such an old relationship. "I believe you are already acquainted with Mr Dacre. He gave me a most glowing account of a walk in Allingham Park, about a week ago."

"It was a beautiful afternoon," said Mr Dacre, drily; "we have had few like it."

"Miss Courtenay has such powers of walking," observed Miss Forester; "and that is so very enviable.

I should not have been able to see these little merry creatures this afternoon, if my father had not promised to call for me in the carriage at five o'clock." The little merry creatures were, at that instant, looking peculiarly solemn, waiting for Mr Grantley to say grace, and Edith could scarcely repress a smile.

"You take great interest in the school, I think," said Mr Dacre.

"Yes," replied Edith, simply; "it is my hobby. Every one must find something to occupy them; but of course I am only head assistant."

"It is easy to see in these cases," said Mr Dacre, "what a blessing eating and drinking is. You might try for years with other things before you could make these children feel, as plainly as they do now, that they were cared for."

"I am not sure they understand much about it at any time," said Edith, smiling.

"We will try," continued Mr Dacre. "What do you say, my little fellow?" and he patted the shoulder of a flaxen-headed urchin, who, with both hands, was lifting his cake to his mouth; "don't you think Miss Courtenay is the kindest young lady you ever saw?"

"I don't know," said the boy, still fondly clasping his treasure, and speaking with his mouth full. Edith and Mr Dacre laughed.

"Oh! but that is rude," said Miss Forester, who had been standing close behind: "put your hands down, and tell us if you are not extremely obliged to all the ladies and gentlemen who take so much interest in your welfare."

The boy stared, and understanding only that he was to put his hands in his lap, quickly moved them.

"There's a good boy!" said Miss Forester, patronisingly, and advancing as near to the table as

she dared without touching it. "It is quite delightful to see them brought up in these habits of obedience. You must be very fond of all the ladies and gentlemen, I am sure, my dear?"

"He is more fond of his cake than of anything else just now," half whispered Edith; "you had better let him go on."

The child, seizing upon the permission, snatched up his cake; and then, lifting his cup to his mouth with an awkward jerk, divided its contents between Edith, Miss Forester, and the floor.

Miss Forester started back with an exclamation of disgust, which included not only the little culprit before her, but all others of his race; while Edith wiped her dress, and began to assure the boy that no one would be angry. In an instant Miss Forester had caught the words, and with the prospective view of sufficient wealth to purchase the most splendid silks in Waterloo House, thought it worth while to sacrifice her fawn-coloured satinet, for the sake of appearing amiable in Mr Dacre's eyes. "These sudden frights make one nervous," she said; "but one would bear anything rather than mar their enjoyment. Don't think anything more about it, my dear. Certainly it is a beautiful dress spoiled!"—and her voice became louder, and her countenance flushed, as she gazed at the large greasy stain. "It was a present, too, from my father, only a month ago; and you know," she added, with a pleading apologetic look at Mr Dacre, "we are often annoyed at these misfortunes for a friend's sake, when we should not care about them for our own."

"It is rather a handsome dress for the occasion," said Mr Dacre, as his eye glanced upon Edith's dark silk and straw bonnet.

Miss Forester perceived the comparison, and her previous dislike to Edith was not a little increased.

"It is rather better, perhaps, than was absolutely necessary; but I was afraid of keeping you waiting, my dear Sir; and therefore chose the first dress that was at hand. A poor woman detained me, or I should have gone to my room sooner."

"Oh!" was Mr Dacre's answer; and he walked away, and began a conversation with Mr Grantley.

Miss Forester remained with Edith, and pertinaciously devoted herself to her for the rest of the afternoon. The appearance of interest in Mr Dacre's manner had alarmed her, and she was resolved there should be no more tête-à-têtes: not that she had formed any positive plan for preventing him from becoming intimate with other persons—she acted merely from the impulse of the moment; and perhaps, if her motives and objects had been placed before her in words, she might have acknowledged them to be wrong. But Miss Forester had never entered upon the task of self-examination. The outward world, with its pomp and pride, its cares, its business, and its pleasures, was to her all in all; and, engrossed in its pursuits, she was passing through life without devoting one moment to the consideration of that busy world within—that tumultuous crowd of thoughts and feelings, which at every moment are born, and die, and are forgotten, but upon which God has stamped the seal of immortality.

CHAPTER VII.

THE dinner and the school-feast, the congratulations and the visits, passed quickly, as all human events must pass; and left upon Edith's mind only the recollection of the effort it had been to keep up appearances, and avoid betraying to the world the uneasiness lurking in her heart. But a greater trial was now approaching. The letters from the travellers spoke of their wish to return home earlier than they had at first intended. The weather was unpropitious for excursions; and the beauties of Normandy and the Seine lost much of their charm under the depressing influence of a November sky. Not, indeed, such a sky as that which weighs down the spirit of an unfortunate Englishman, in a country village, without resources in himself, or interest in his neighbours; but nevertheless one sufficiently gloomy to make even a bride and bridegroom sigh for a blazing fire, and the cheerfulness of home society. Why they should have visited the Continent at all, in the autumn, for so short a time, was a subject of astonishment to their friends. But Edward was married in October,—a month proverbially fine; and under the influence of a clear sky, a bright sun, and a happy heart, he had, as usual, allowed the brilliancy of the present to hide the coming shadows of the future, and persuaded himself that nothing could be more agreeable than to give Laura a foretaste of the pleasures of a foreign tour, preparatory to a longer residence in Italy the ensuing year.

The dulness of the weather did not however appear to have brought any change in their real enjoyment.

Both were evidently perfectly happy; and even Edith, as she read Edward's amusing lamentations over their disappointments, and Laura's affectionate assurances that she was too well satisfied to find fault with passing storms, could scarcely tremble for the prudence of the step her brother had taken, or doubt whether he had chosen a wife suited to his character. Charlotte was still absent, paying a round of visits in the neighbourhood of London; there was therefore no opportunity of gaining from her any of the minute details which can only be learnt in conversation, and with which Edith longed to be acquainted; and she was obliged to summon all her patience, and occupy herself in her ordinary duties, while she waited for the day on which Edward and his bride were to be welcomed at Allingham.

It was on a chill, gloomy evening, when the fog that had hung over every object during the day was turning into a drizzling rain, while the moaning wind among the leafless trees, and the thick bank of leaden clouds, partially gilded by the setting sun, portended a stormy night, that Edith paced the gravel-walk from the house to the carriage-drive through the Park, anxiously listening to every sound, and regardless of the weather, from the excitement of her feelings; for now that she was about to meet her brother, she remembered her offences against him, and doubted whether he could so entirely have excused her neglect of his wishes as he appeared to have done. Mrs Courtenay and Jane had thrown themselves, one upon the sofa, the other into a large arm chair wheeled close to the fire, and were contriving to banish the weariness of delay by occasional complaints of the season and the state of the roads; to which Jane added a few remarks upon Edward's want of punctuality, that were by no means responded to by her mother. Even these topics were, however, at last

exhausted; and, in default of conversation, Jane closed her eyes, merely, as she said, because the firelight was painful; and in a short time, Edward and Laura, and all outward circumstances, were forgotten. Edith, too, was tired of her solitary walk, and began to be sensible that a November mist might as well be avoided. She resolved upon taking one more turn, and then attending to her mother's request, sent about ten minutes before, that she would on no account stay out any longer. The resolution was scarcely made, when the distant sound of bells reached her ear. It was a joyous peal from the old village church, yet something of a saddened under-tone seemed blended with it, as the wailing autumnal wind bore it towards her, now loudly and merrily, and again so faintly as nearly to be inaudible. In Edith's melancholy mood, she could almost have fancied it a token of the consequences that would follow upon her brother's marriage; an event regarded by all but herself with unmixed satisfaction. But the certainty that Edward was arrived, put a stop to any longer reverie; and she had only time to give her mother the information, when the carriage was heard approaching the house. The next minute Edward was in the hall, receiving his mother's blessing, and presenting to her his young and beautiful wife.

"She is your youngest child, my dearest mother," he whispered, "and you will love her very dearly for my sake."

Laura withdrew her arm from her husband, and advanced to receive Mrs Courtenay's kiss.

"For your sake, now," she said, as she looked in Edward's face with a sweet, bright smile; "for my own, I trust, soon." And then, turning to Jane and Edith, she added, "May I not be introduced to your sisters?"

Edith's warm affections were in a moment roused. The tone and manner were so simple and winning, that it was impossible to retain any feeling of coldness; and as her eye rested upon the slight, fairy-like form, and childish, but exquisitely lovely, face before her, all Edward's offences were forgotten. His love was accounted for, and his extravagance seemed but the natural homage paid to the captivating grace of the object of his choice. Laura indeed appeared born to receive and enjoy all that wealth and affection could lavish upon her, and even the most foreboding mind could hardly have associated any idea but that of happiness with her sparkling hazel eyes, laughing mouth, and brilliant complexion. At the first glance, whilst she was standing enveloped in shawls and furs, Edith was fascinated with her beauty; and when, on entering the drawing-room, she carelessly threw off her bonnet and cloak, and showed the delicately moulded little head, and long fair neck, which suited so well with the general contour of her features, Edith felt that she had never looked upon any thing so lovely. Edward said but little; he was watching with intense pleasure the effect of his wife's appearance and manner; and Edith, though she noticed his silence, was more at her ease than she expected to have been, for his greeting had been cordial and affectionate. The delight of the moment had made him forget any causes of annoyance, if he felt them to exist. Mrs. Courtenay, afraid lest Laura should be suffering from cold or fatigue, soon began to urge upon her, what in a similar situation she would have thought absolutely necessary for herself,—a speedy retirement to her own room.

"But," said Laura, in the clear, joyous tone of one who had never known care, "you will make me think I am an invalid, and I never was ill in my life. I am stronger than any one. I can go to a ball, and

dance all night, and get up just the same the next morning; and when we were in town in the spring, I was at the Opera regularly on a Saturday night, and yet, however late it was when I went to bed, I never missed being in time for the music at the Roman Catholic chapel on Sunday morning."

Edith looked at her brother,—she thought he bit his lip, and a cloud passed over his face; but he turned away; and again, with a chilled, blank feeling, she gazed upon her beautiful sister-in-law.

"But, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay, whose notions of right were more shocked by the idea of the Roman Catholic chapel, than by the dissipation, and almost inevitable profanation of the Sunday, "Edward never told me you were a Roman Catholic."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Laura, laughing, "I only went there for the music. In the country we always go to church once a day; but in town there are so many engagements, it is not practicable."

"Laura," said her husband—and there was something in his tone, which, to Edith's ear, betokened any thing but satisfaction—"you had better go to your room now, or you will be late for dinner. I suppose you had my letter," he added, speaking to his mother; "we were not able to stop on the road, so I thought a late dinner would be the wisest arrangement."

"I should like much to go all over the house first," replied Laura. "You promised me I should, and I have been dreaming about it all the way."

"It is too late, my love; you will see nothing to-night, and it will be a pity to lessen any pleasure you might have to-morrow. I should just like you, though, to come with me into the servants' hall, and speak to the housekeeper, and the other people about the place. I suspect they are all waiting there to see you."

"It is too late, my love," said Laura, with an arch smile. "I don't fancy going into the servants' hall to-night. That pleasure shall be deferred till to-morrow too."

"But if I wish it," said Edward.

"But if I don't wish it," continued Laura.

"You would not vex me, I am sure, my love. It is expected of you."

"That is a pity," said Laura, "because you see there are such things as false expectations; so now we will go up stairs." And, rising from her seat, she playfully put her arm within his to lead him from the room. Edith again glanced at her brother; but the expression of dissatisfaction had passed away.

"You are a sadly spoilt child," he said, only half-reproachfully, as he watched his wife's graceful motions; "but you must have your own way, I suppose, to-night, at least as regards the servants." And Laura's bewitching smile of gratitude completed her victory.

"It is not difficult to see who will rule at Allingham," said Jane, when they were gone. "How one is deceived in people! I should have thought that Edward, of all persons, was the least likely to be governed by his wife."

"Hush! my dear Jane," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay, "you speak so loudly. It is all very natural and right: you know they are but just married; and she is very young."

"Quite a child," said Edith; and the words spoke volumes of disappointment.

"And so beautiful!" continued Mrs Courtenay; "she must have been a most lovely baby."

"I don't see that she is much more now," observed Jane; "Charlotte said she did not look more than sixteen, but I must say I was not entirely prepared for such infantine ways."

"My dear Jane, you are hard judging. Her manners suit her exactly."

"That is just the objection to them. They suit her face and figure, but they do not suit her position. A playful kitten is all very well, but a playful bride is detestable. What do you say, Edith?"

The question was either not heard, or not sufficiently agreeable, to be attended to; and, in a short time, the sound of the dinner-bell, and the re-entrance of Edward and Laura, put an end to any further observations.

"You are silent, my dear Edith," said Edward, with a slight effort of manner, when the second course was removed, and the first esprit of the conversation had subsided; "I hope you are not ill?"

"No, thank you, I never was better;" and silence again ensued.

"You have been overworking yourself, I am afraid. I have told Laura what an indefatigable person you are, and that she must become your assistant."

"But Laura did not agree to the proposal," said his wife, with a smile which always had the effect of neutralising any unpleasant impression her words might occasion. "I am rejoiced that there is some one to take the Lady Bountiful's burden from me; it was always my horror in a country life; besides, you know, it would be interfering."

"She is only joking," said Edward, observing the increased gloom on his sister's face. "You will know her better by-and-by, and then you will not believe any thing she says of herself."

"No one was ever more in earnest, Edward—I don't understand such things, and never shall—so Edith shall be lady paramount over the Allingham charities, to her heart's content."

"Thank you," said Edith, gravely; "but I have enough to do at Elsham."

Laura looked at her sister-in-law as if rather astonished at her manner, and then sunk into an unusual fit of abstraction. Edward fidgetted, and began to be uncomfortable. He had that indescribable feeling of something being uncongenial in the elements of his family party, which perhaps is more painful than open difference of opinion.

"You have told me nothing about Gertrude," he said, willing to change the conversation. "What account does she give of my aunt?"

"Very much as usual," replied Jane. "Mrs Heathfield is always complaining: some people are."

"I do so long to see Gertrude," said Laura. "She wrote me such a kind note just before we were married, as kind as any I had, even from my own relations: and I have a cousin who knows her, and says she is not at all like people in general."

"I don't see that," said Jane. "She has eyes, nose, and mouth like the rest of the world; and eats, drinks, and sleeps like a rational being. Then she is neither tall nor short, nor pretty nor ugly; neither a genius nor a dunce. In fact, I don't know where you would find a less singular person."

"But her mind," said Edward. "We are scarcely judges, indeed, as to what she really is; but if her letters and general report speak truth, she is singularly good."

"No, no, Edward," exclaimed Laura; "I am sure she is not like that. Singularly good people are always disagreeable. We had one staying with us once, and she did nothing but find fault from morning till night."

"It is a melancholy truth though, with regard to Gertrude," said Edward, smiling.

"Perfectly impossible," continued Laura, "or she would have sent me a sermon on my wedding-day, with a little book bound in silk and gold, as you put

medicines for children into sugar, containing 'Advice to a young wife.' I had three given to me as it was, from three singularly good old aunts."

"They meant kindly, my love," said Edward, in the tone in which he would have gently reproved a forward child.

"Good intentions!" exclaimed Laura, laughing; "I am tired of them. I had a fit of them once, and they made me uncomfortable, so I gave them up."

"Certainly," said Edith, "they are of little use without good actions."

"That is exactly what I feel; and as I am too humble to suppose I shall ever perform any good actions, I see no reason to trouble myself with the intentions."

"You will frighten my mother if you talk so wildly, my love," said Edward. "She is not accustomed to such rhodomontade. Edith, I suspect, is alarmed already."

"Not half so much as I am," said Laura. "Do you know, Edith, Edward has done nothing but describe your virtues all day."

"I only told the truth," replied Edward, in his natural kind manner. "I hope she will not think it too much trouble to teach her own good ways to such an idle child as you are."

Laura drew up her long neck, and appeared not quite pleased. Child though she was, she was fully aware of her position as a married woman, and did not desire the dictation of an unmarried sister-in-law; and Edward had no sooner spoken than he perceived his mistake.

"I have no ways to teach," said Edith coldly, her pleasure in the praise struggling with her disappointment; "and if I had, I should rather have looked forward, Edward, to learning something from your wife."

Edward looked ominously grave. He felt what was intended, and he also felt that it was neither the place nor the time for the observation to be made.

"All persons, I imagine," he replied, in a tone as cold, "have some points in which they may be useful to others. Laura has been accustomed to a London life; you to a country one. I suppose you may mutually benefit each other."

"We will make a compact then," said Laura, gaily; "I will teach you the fashions, and you shall take charge of my duties."

There was a smile from all but Edith, who was immoveably rigid; and Laura, feeling provoked, proposed an adjournment to the drawing-room.

Edith's stiffness relaxed as they drew round the fire, and she tried to find a subject of conversation. "Is this the last new reticule?" she said, taking up a large and very handsome carriage bag, which had been left on the sofa.

"No," replied Laura. "It was a wedding present; you shall guess from whom."

"Gertrude," said Jane: "no one else would have thought of such a thing."

"Because no one else is so much in the habit of consulting other persons' comfort," observed Edith.

"The note I mentioned was sent with it," said Laura; "and she told me she preferred work to ornaments, because it was the association generally which made them valuable; and therefore she would rather wait till she could hope I really loved her, and in the meantime give me something useful. Just see how nicely the bag is fitted up."

"Gertrude has a great idea of suitableness in presents," said Edith. "She always contrives to think upon the very thing one wants, even if it is a mere trifle."

"She is rich," remarked Jane; "and can afford to give presents."

"Not much richer than we are, now," said Edith. "And besides, she seldom does give what people call handsome presents."

"Gertrude must be the hundred and first wonder of the world," said Laura. "I shall give up wishing to see her. I never met with agreeable perfection yet."

"Her perfections are not dazzling ones," said Edith, a little mollified by the appreciation of her sister's gift. "You must know her intimately before you find out her superiority."

"So much the worse," observed Laura. "Hidden goodness is the most alarming of all. One goes on blundering, and imagining one is doing and saying every thing that is right; and, all at once, some unlucky look or word touches the vulnerable point, and a whole host of virtues stand up in battle array, and crush one before one is at all prepared."

"Crush, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay, who was just settling herself for her evening doze; "don't talk of crushing—it is so cruel: put it out of the window carefully. I daresay it will recover."

Laura laughed heartily; but it was not the Priory fashion to correct Mrs Courtenay's mistakes, and the conversation continued.

"One thing I really give Gertrude credit for," said Jane,—"consistency. If it were not for her, I should really think sometimes that all the world were hypocrites. They talk so well and act so badly."

"You learn to think them so, on the Continent," said Laura,—"at the Roman Catholic chapels. There can be no sincerity in all the bowing, and ringing of bells and walking about."

"Were you there often?" asked Edith.

"No, we were only absent three weeks; but the

Sundays were wet and dull, and I persuaded Edward to go, just for amusement."

"People might say the same as you do, of our forms," observed Edith, "if they did not understand them."

"Oh, no," exclaimed Laura; "there is meaning in what we do, but the Roman Catholic ceremonies are absurd. What is the use of the little boys and the tapers?"

"I don't know," said Edith; "I never was at a Roman Catholic chapel."

"Never!" repeated Laura in astonishment. "But it is a sight to be seen, like any others; and then the music is exquisite."

"It can scarcely be right, though," said Edith, "to make any thing solemn a matter of amusement. We should be shocked to see the service of the church represented in the theatre; and I can fancy good Roman Catholics feeling just the same when their worship is considered a mere show."

"As to the Church service in a theatre," said Laura, "I am no judge, for I never saw it: but I daresay I should not think it wrong, if no one else did. You know in Masaniello they kneel down on the stage, and chant, and very beautiful it is. It makes one feel very religious at the time—so it must be good."

"But do you think the people who sing are feeling the same?" asked Edith.

"Oh, no. They are mere actors—of course all that they care for is singing in tune and putting themselves in proper attitudes."

"But the words," said Edith, looking extremely grave,—"only think of the words they use."

"They don't mean them," replied Laura. "Greek and Latin, or mere nonsense, would do just as well."

"And the third commandment!" said Edith.

Laura seemed a little startled. "We are running away from our first subject," she said. "The chanting in Masaniello has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic chapels. The people are not acting there."

"You said they were," replied Edith. "You called them hypocrites."

"I did not mean exactly that they were; only that they seemed so."

"And when you go," continued Edith, "you of course put on an appearance of reverence, and yet all the time you are thinking of the service as an amusement. Who is acting then?"

There was a short pause, broken by Laura. "You are hard upon me, Edith," she said: "I daresay you think me dreadfully wicked; but I was bred up with my notions, and you were bred up with yours; so we shall never agree; but I am sure you are a great deal better than I am."

Edith felt this was true; and a certain consciousness of manner unfortunately showed it,—unfortunately, for it served to efface the impression her words had made. Laura would have been touched by humility and gentleness, in one whom she candidly acknowledged her superior; but Edith's smile of acquiescence irritated her. A little reflection indeed brought to Edith's mind, follies, and worse than follies, both of thought and action, which sunk her infinitely low in her own esteem; but it was then too late to be humble. The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of her brother, and the preparation for tea, and the opportunity was lost. So it is through life: we yield to the impulse of the moment, and utter a hasty word, or are silent when we should have spoken, or suffer a proud look to betray our evil feelings; and then turn and repent, and bewail the infirmity of our nature; and the sorrow, when it is the sorrow of a Christian, is seen and accepted, but

the impression of our weakness is stamped upon another's heart, and its effect we may well dread to calculate. On this occasion it was plainly visible. Laura's constraint for the short remainder of the evening was the more perceptible, from the contrast it afforded to her general openness of manner; and when Edith, on her return home, thought over in solitude the occurrences of the evening, the remembrance of her sister's worldly notions and of Edward's inconsistency, was less painful than the consciousness of her own self-conceit and coldness of manner. And Edith was sincere in her self-accusation; but the fault lay too deep to be easily corrected. Never-failing humility is the last acquired virtue of a Christian.

CHAPTER VIII.

"You are grave, my love," said Edward, as he stood by the breakfast room window on the following morning, pointing out the different objects of interest in the neighbourhood.

"Not exactly grave," replied Laura, keeping her eyes still fixed upon the Priory, which Edward had been minutely describing—"I was only thinking."

"Thinking of what?"

"Oh! nothing,—it is very pretty. That bow-window, you say, is the library."

"'Nothing' will not do for me," said Edward, as he drew her fondly towards him, and forced her to look in his face. "Remember our agreement, Laura; we were to have no concealments of any kind,—whether in grief or joy, it was to be all the same."

"So it shall be, when there is any thing to be told; but it would be absurd to confess every foolish thought that passes through one's mind, and makes one look grave for the moment."

"Not absurd, if I wish it," replied Edward; "so tell me what was it? Were you thinking of home?"

"Oh, no," exclaimed Laura, earnestly; "why should I? You are my home now."

"Then you are disappointed in the place: it is not so pretty as you expected."

"Yes, it is a great deal prettier, larger, and handsomer, and the view more extensive. I cannot tell you what it was, Edward, that came over me—it was a feeling more than a thought."

"A feeling about the Priory," said Edward.

Laura hesitated. "I can hardly understand why I should have it;—your mother is so kind; and Jane, too; and Edith"—

"Is what?"

"So—so good, I think; so much better than I am."

"Time will prove that," said Edward, as he imprinted a kiss on the fair, open forehead of his young wife. "You are good in my eyes. Is not that sufficient?"

"But I am not good in Edith's," continued Laura —"I can see I am not—and I am frightened—I shall never feel at ease where she is."

"Never is a very long day," said Edward, smiling. "It is only Edith's manner at first—she is so warm-hearted and sensible: you must be fond of her by-and-by."

"That is not the question; she will never be fond of me. She thinks I am not fitted for you. I am sure she does; and you will find I was right about her not being my bridesmaid. She did not choose to be, and that was her only motive for declining."

"Rather severe," said Edward. "You know I was vexed myself; but we agreed we would not begin our home life with being annoyed. Her time is very much occupied, and I really think that nothing but necessity would have induced her to refuse. You must remember, too, that although we are all in all to each other, we cannot cut ourselves off from our relations."

"Who would wish it?" said Laura. "I am sure I only want to be one of the family in every thing; but then I must be met half way."

"And so you will be. In a week's time, Edith and you will be the dearest friends imaginable."

Laura shook her head.

"I can never get on with any person I am afraid of; and you know I am shy, though I do talk fast."

"You were shy of the servants last night," said Edward; "but you must conquer the feeling to-day. I want you to know them all—to take the management of affairs into your own hands; and remember we are to be very economical."

"Say it once more," exclaimed Laura, laughing; "I have not heard it quite often enough yet. Economy is an admirable thing; I like it extremely; it means a handsome house and a fine park, and splendid furniture, and six thousand a year. This room is a specimen of your economy; it suits my taste exactly."

"I am really in earnest, Laura," replied her husband, more gravely than usual. "It has been a great delight to procure every thing that might make your new home pleasant; but there is not the less occasion for care."

"Of course you are right," said Laura; "men always are. Papa recommends economy too, and with more reason: I know his property is encumbered."

The colour mounted to Edward's cheek. "I talked to your father," he said, "and he perfectly agreed with me; and you must take advice upon our judgment. Ladies do not understand the details of business."

"No, indeed," exclaimed Laura; "I never wish to hear the word. Just tell me how much money I may spend, and I shall need nothing more."

"Suppose I were to say that we ought not to exceed two thousand a year;" and Edward looked earnestly in his wife's face.

"Then I should say you were speaking nonsense. With a fortune of six thousand, why should we confine ourselves to two? You must be growing miserly in your old age, Edward, or has the burden of a wife brought with it an over-burden of prudence?"

"It has brought a burden of anxiety, lest my best

earthly treasure should ever have a wish ungratified," said Edward, affectionately.

"Then I may have my own way," continued Laura, "and we will hear nothing more about economy: it is such a very vulgar virtue."

Edward felt ashamed of his own weakness, but had no strength to overcome it. He could not bear to cloud the brightness of Laura's prospects at the very opening of their married life, and contented himself with the knowledge that he had acted an honourable part by acquainting Mr Howard with the state of his property before he had made his proposal.

"You must learn to believe me serious," my dear Laura," he replied. "All comforts and luxuries that are suitable to your position in society I trust you will never want, but any thing beyond we must both be contented without."

"Thank you," exclaimed Laura; "I am perfectly satisfied. My position in society is a very desirable one—the mistress of Allingham, and the wife of one of the first persons in the county."

"Not exactly one of the first; I could name six or seven at least whose fortune is more than double my own."

"It is not fortune merely," continued Laura; "your family and connexions must be considered; and besides, you know you will soon be a member of parliament. Papa told me that."

"It was more than I said," replied Edward, hastily. "I acknowledged that I might almost certainly be a county member if I wished it, because the seat has been held by the Allingham Courtenays for years and years; but I did not at all mean to imply that any thing would induce me to stand."

"But I should so like you to be in Parliament," said Laura; "you would speak so well. Papa said he was sure you would distinguish yourself."

"Silly child," replied Edward, in a tone of half earnestness; "you must not talk of things you don't understand. Your father was fond of me, and saw every thing I did or said in a favourable point of view; but if I had the united talents of all the first men of the age, I have not wealth to support a contested election. It would be ruin."

Laura laughed gaily: "They say that there is some point or other upon which every person is insane, and I do think this of economy is yours, Edward. If you practised it I should be frightened, and think you required a keeper; but happily it all begins and ends in words."

Unknowingly Laura had touched upon a discordant note. Edward could scarcely have told why the conversation was disagreeable; but he felt it to be so, and threw himself into a chair and took up a book.

"Not now," said Laura, playfully, as she caught the volume from his hands. "We are to go over the house together, and I am to look demure, and make speeches to Mrs Somebody the housekeeper, and Mr Somebody the house-steward, and beg them to keep all the other somebodies in order. You know I, who am nobody, cannot possibly talk to somebody, unless you are near to help me."

"You who are every body, you mean," said Edward—"the pervading spirit of the establishment."

"No, no!" exclaimed Laura; "I have warned you often before that I cannot be any such thing. You tell me that you have no intention of making laws for the nation, and I tell you that I have no intention of making laws for the household. They must take care of themselves."

"We shall see," replied Edward. "Some persons, you know, are born to greatness, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. Now, as I conceive that a woman's greatness consists

in the proper management of her husband's home, I must insist upon thrusting it on you; and, as a preliminary step, we will go to the servants' hall."

Laura made no further objection; and the remainder of the morning was spent in listening to domestic details, which she acknowledged could never be irksome while Edward was at her side, and in wandering from room to room, forming plans for the future, and talking of the friends who were to be invited to fill the house as soon as they were comfortably settled. Something also was said of the poor, and Mrs Dixon the housekeeper was strictly enjoined to have soup made three times a week, and allow nothing like waste amongst the servants: an injunction received with such low curtseys and fair promises, that Laura considered nothing more was required to be done.

"I have kept this for the last," said Edward, as he threw open the folding doors that opened from the antechamber into Laura's morning room. "This is especially for yourself, dearest—a place of refuge when you are tired of me, or of your company. You see it is not finished yet, but I intend it to be perfect of its kind."

Laura's delighted countenance spoke her full approbation, and she ran eagerly to the window to look at the view, but started back immediately. "Oh! Edward, that cottage—that frightful cottage!—it is precisely in the way."

"What do you mean?" asked Edward; "there is no cottage in the front."

"No, but at the side. Just come where I am, and you will see; it hides the prettiest part of the village, and it is so detestibly ugly—you will have it taken down."

Edward looked considerably annoyed. "I see how it is," he said; "I cut down one or two trees there just before I went away, and it made very little

difference from below, but this new window has the full benefit. It was stupid of me not to think about it when I sent my orders. I am sure we might have managed the room differently."

"But it will be easy enough now," said Laura: "you have only to order it to be taken down. The poor people will find plenty of other cottages to go to."

"If it were a common labourer's cottage, it would not signify," replied Edward; "but, unfortunately, it is inhabited by my old nurse, who is fidgetty and cross, and has met with many misfortunes; and when she went into it, I promised she should never be turned out again."

"Shall I quote you a very, very old proverb about promises?" said Laura, as she looked archly in his face. "Don't be so solemn, Edward; I am not really advising you to break your word; but there are ways and means."

"Fire, arsenic, and prussic acid, for instance," said Edward.

"Oh fie! I never thought of anything half so wicked: what I meant were little, gentle, insinuating ways."

"Such as the cuckoo uses when it turns its neighbour out of its nest, I suppose," continued Edward. "You must explain yourself more clearly."

"Not yet, because I don't exactly know what I mean myself; but I am sure the thing is to be done, and well and graciously too; and I shall never rest till it is."

"Shall I tell you a better mode of satisfying yourself?" said Edward. "Make up your mind to bear it patiently, and not think about it. We should never forgive ourselves for making poor old Martha uncomfortable for the few remaining years of her life."

"But she should not be uncomfortable," persisted Laura. "We could easily manage for her to have a cottage quite as good, and a great deal prettier. Besides, Edward, it is a question between your wife and your nurse—which do you love the best?"

"Which have I the greatest confidence in? you should ask. I think that my nurse is old, and ignorant, and fretful; but I think that my wife is sensible, and kind-hearted, and self-denying, and therefore I expect far more from one than I do from the other."

"Very pretty," said Laura, "but not very true. Your wife never was self-denying in her life. It was not the Oakhampton fashion."

"But it will be the Allingham fashion—and this shall be the first lesson."

Laura looked disappointed; and there was a little petulancy in her manner as she moved from the window, and walked about the room, examining the furniture.

"It is hopeless to think of planting it out," she said, as she returned to the window; "it would be years before any trees would grow high enough to hide it."

"We might cover it with evergreens," replied Edward; "it will not be objectionable then. And it might be much worse; it is old and thatched."

"But the time—just consider the amazing length of time before that hideous red wall can possibly be covered; and every person who comes into the room will see it and talk about it; and I shall have to repeat the story over and over again; and, after all, no one will understand why it is not taken away; for there is not one person in a hundred who would care like you for an old nurse."

"Dear Laura!" said Edward, "you cannot possibly be as vexed as I am. I had set my heart upon your having everything to please you: and if you



only knew how I had planned the room for weeks and weeks, I think you would feel that it was not my fault."

"No," exclaimed Laura, regaining, in an instant, her natural sweetness of temper, when she saw that her husband was annoyed; "I know you could never do anything but what was kind and thoughtful. You will try, though,"—and she laid her hand upon his arm, and looked at him beseechingly.

"Why do you ask me? dearest! you know it is impossible;"—but the tone was less decided, and Laura saw her influence.

"Not quite impossible—only say you will think about it."

"If it could do any good, I would; but where is the use of thinking, when it is out of one's power to act?"

"There can be no harm in it, and you may find some way of managing."

Edward turned again to the window, and the cottage was more unsightly than before. He did not say that he would think; but he stood for some minutes in silence; and then, gazing intently on the lovely face at his side, proposed that they should go into the pleasure ground.

CHAPTER IX.

THE dressing-bell at the Priory was heard at the usual hour on that same evening; and Mrs Courtenay and Jane retired to prepare for dinner; but Edith still lingered by the drawing-room fire, her eyes fixed on the dreary scene without, but her thoughts wandering to other subjects. She had seen nothing of her brother and sister during the day, yet they had scarcely been absent from her mind for a single hour. They were now expected to dine, and she was to be ready to receive them; and if they had been strangers, the task would have been easy; but the recollection of the preceding evening's conversation was too vivid to allow of her feeling any pleasure in the prospect of a family party. She was uncomfortable in Edward's presence, from the doubt whether she had behaved kindly; and Laura had scarcely uttered a sentence without paining her. To have seen her in society, and watched her graceful manners, and the varying expression of her features, and listened to her clear silvery laugh, would have been agreeable and interesting; but to hear her converse, and be reminded every moment of Edward's weakness in suffering himself to be captivated by mere external attraction, was a trial of no ordinary nature. Such, at least, it seemed to Edith; and as she recalled the different subjects introduced, and the opinions Laura had expressed, her vexation almost vented itself in tears. Instead of a friend and companion, she had found only an elegant, worldly-minded girl, with some natural cleverness, and a certain simplicity and warmth of manner, pleasing

on a first acquaintance, but possessing no real charm apart from more valuable qualities. Whatever her disposition might be, it was evident that she had been spoilt by education; and the only hope for Edward's happiness was in his remaining blind to the follies of his wife. In a certain degree, this judgment was correct. Laura was as yet nothing more than an elegant, amiable, clever girl; but it is hard to say that the faults of eighteen are incurable; and whatever had been the defects of her education, the influence of her husband and his family might be all-powerful for good, if only it were exerted aright. In this, however, lay the difficulty. Edward's affection, and inherent weakness of character, caused him to be led, rather than to lead. His mother, and Jane, and Charlotte, possessed scarcely higher principles than his wife; Gertrude was absent; and Edith, the only person who could really be of use, was unconscious of the duty devolving upon her. Even now, as she pondered upon the deficiencies of Laura's character, it never occurred to her that she might be the instrument of effecting a change. Her own duties seemed evident; she was to pursue her usual path, attend to the schools, and visit in the parish and work for the poor, and Laura was to occupy herself as she chose. There was no probability that their tastes would harmonise; and, therefore, the more agreeable line of conduct would be not to interfere, but to wait patiently, in the hope that Edward's example might be of service in raising her tone of mind. And as the resolution was formed, Edith gathered up her work, and, startled by the sound of carriage wheels, went to dress for dinner. The second bell had rung before her toilette was completed, and she felt glad to be spared the irksomeness of the quarter of an hour's formal conversation in the drawing-room, since formal she had

determined it must be, while there were so many topics on which there could be no sympathy. But Laura's merry laugh, and Edward's smile, as she seated herself at the table, and apologised for being late, gave no symptoms of formality; and in a few minutes Edith's restraint was subdued by the recital of some travelling adventures, and the grace and ease with which Laura took off the French manner, and mimicked the Normandy patois.

"It must be a delightful thing to have travelled," said Jane, when they left the dining-room. "It saves such an infinity of trouble in finding subjects of conversation; and really, with so many acquaintances, talking is the labour of one's life."

"Not with you, Jane, I am sure," said Edith; "you seldom trouble yourself to entertain any one."

"Nor with you, Edith; for you are never in the way when any one calls. My whole morning is often wasted by visitors."

"It is not of so much consequence to you as it is to me," replied Edith; "for you have not as much to do."

"There I must beg to differ," said Jane, pettishly; "my occupations are as numerous, although they are different from yours."

"But you cannot mean to say they are equally important," said Edith.

"Indeed I do. The cultivation of one's own mind is as important as the cultivation of other persons'."

"Is this the best mode of cultivating one's mind?" asked Edith ironically; and she took up the last volume of an inferior novel.

Jane made no reply, but her annoyance was evident in her countenance; and Laura, who had never been accustomed to any thing like discordance between sisters, felt extremely uncomfortable, and endeavoured if possible to turn the conversation. Edith would

indeed have been pained, if she had known the impression these few sentences produced. From long habit, she was not aware how perceptible the disagreement between herself and her sisters was to a stranger. She had been accustomed to speak openly —sometimes from an irritation of feeling, sometimes from a real, though mistaken, idea of doing good; and as the difference of opinion seldom went beyond a few passing expressions, or a satirical look, she had not supposed that it would be noticed. Neither was she in general sensible of the extent of the wrong she was committing. The error was so trifling in appearance, as frequently to be unthought of; but it is the constant repetition of a slight fault, which effectually destroys the happiness of domestic life; and whether it be indolence, procrastination, carelessness, hastiness of temper, or any of the numerous other minor defects of character, it must always, in the end, mar the influence of the highest virtues. Edith was sincere, and generous, and self-denying; earnest in religion, and unwearied in exertion; and beyond the circle of her own family, was considered a pattern of all that is amiable in woman: but, in her home, she was at times irritable and forgetful, and pursued her notions of duty without sufficient consideration for the prejudices of others; and her sisters acknowledged her goodness, but accused her of inconsistency, and felt little inclined to follow an example which produced so doubtful a result upon the general happiness.

"How often do you hear from Gertrude?" asked Laura, thinking the subject a safe one.

"Once a week, generally," said Mrs Courtenay; "when her aunt is ill, she writes more frequently, or if she has anything to send. What was there in the packet that came this morning? I forget."

"A new duet," replied Edith. "She fancied it

would suit you, Laura, as Edward said you sang a great deal."

"I used to do so at Oakhampton, for I had almost always a cousin or some one to practise with; but I never sing anything alone."

"You must practise a great deal now, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "you have such a beautiful instrument, and either Edith, or Jane, or Charlotte, when she is at home, will be delighted to sing with you."

Laura looked at her sisters, expecting the proposal to be received with pleasure, but she was disappointed.

"I sing very little," said Jane, "only when no one is at hand to take my part. It is such a great exertion."

"I don't care for the exertion," observed Edith; "music is worth any trouble, but it takes up so much time."

"But what is time given us for?" asked Laura, "except to enjoy ourselves? I mean a lady's time. Gentlemen and poor people are different."

"You shall come and stay here," said Jane, "and then you will discover. Edith intends giving lectures soon upon the useful expenditure of time, in contradistinction to the ornamental."

"What do you consider useful, Edith?" asked Laura.

"Let me tell you," said Jane, before her sister had time to reply. "First and foremost, teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, to the dirtiest children in the parish—the dirtier the better; secondly, walking over ploughed fields and muddy lanes, to see poor creatures in infectious fevers, and returning home, to the serious alarm of your friends, so ill that you can neither speak nor eat; and thirdly, spending every wet day in making flannel petticoats and smock frocks, and reading sermons."

"That is an exaggeration, Jane," said Edith; "but even if it were not, no one would deny that it would be a more profitable way of employing oneself than in music, and drawing, and worsted work."

"And do you mean that you would never attend to such things?" asked Laura.

"Oh yes, occasionally, if I literally had nothing else to do; but that is never the case with me."

Laura was thoughtful for a moment. "I cannot understand it," she said. "I hope Edward will never expect me to lead such a life."

"What life?" inquired a voice behind her. "I will answer at once that it can be none which you would dislike."

"I don't know that, Edward; you have always told me that Edith was your pattern of goodness; and she thinks nothing right but teaching little children, and making poor people's clothes."

"And to a certain point I agree with her. In the primitive days, women occupied themselves in necessary domestic duties, and works of charity; now, they fritter away their lives in drawing flowers, and working cross-stitch."

"But these are not the primitive days," said Laura; "we are living in the nineteenth century, and you may as well tell us that we ought to dwell in huts, and live upon acorns. We cannot possibly follow the fashions of centuries ago."

"It is a sad state of things," replied Edward, as he seated himself in a luxurious easy chair by the fire-side. "The whole condition of society is corrupted; people seem to have forgotten the very meaning of self-denial, and start back when it is mentioned, as if its name only were a spell, to conjure up the errors of popery."

"But what has that to do with drawing flowers, and working cross-stitch?" said Laura.

"I was merely thinking of the lives of the sisters of charity, and comparing them with our modern efforts of benevolence. I do most sincerely believe, that the nearest human approach to an angel's life upon earth has been made amongst them."

"Very possibly," said Laura; "but again, will you tell me what has that to do with flowers and cross-stitch?"

Edward laughed. "I want to hear you sing, my dear; I am sure your voice and Edith's will suit admirably; just try my favourite duet."

"I will make you answer my question, by-and-by," said Laura; "nothing is so unsatisfactory to me as hearing people talk so much of what used to be. What can it signify to us whether the sisters of charity were angels or not, if it is out of our power to be like them?"

"I never said that," replied Edward; "what I contend for is, that all ought to be like them. If there were any right feeling amongst us, we should see institutions of a similar kind introduced immediately."

"But as there is not any right feeling, we may follow our own pleasure," said Laura; "I am glad at last to have arrived at a conclusion. So now, Edith, we will go and sing."

Edward only smiled. As usual, he had theorised well; and with this he was contented, and spent the next hour in lounging in a comfortable posture, listening to the sweet voices of his wife and his sister, and forming Utopian schemes of possible perfection, which only served to impress upon his mind more fully the present evils of society, and the ignorance and folly of the world.

"To-morrow will be my last day of peace," observed Laura, when the carriage was announced, and the evening closed. "On Monday, I suppose, we shall be overwhelmed with visitors."

"I depend upon you, Edith, to help Laura out of her difficulties," said Edward, turning to his sister; "you know every one so well, that it will be a real charity to introduce them, and find subjects of conversation."

"There can be no need of that," replied Edith; "your foreign tour will be sufficient."

"But that will involve so much talking of oneself," said Laura; "and besides, it is tiresome to repeat the same things over and over again to twenty different persons; and if they happen to compare notes, it becomes absurd."

"You will be at Allingham, of course," said Edward.

Edith hesitated. "I would if I could see the use of it, and if Monday were not such a particularly busy day."

"But is it impossible to obtain one morning's holiday? I should imagine even a secretary of state could do that."

"A secretary of state is not half such an important person as Edith," said Jane. "I wonder you can compare them."

"You may laugh if you will, Jane," replied Edith; "but it is very difficult to find a free day."

Laura turned to Mrs Courtenay. "I am sure," she said, "you would take compassion upon me if you could, but I was afraid it would be a tax upon you, and therefore I did not think of mentioning it."

"Certainly, my dear, if I were but twenty years younger, I would do it directly; but either Jane or Edith will be delighted."

"We did not reckon upon you, Jane," said Edward, "knowing you are so uncertain in your health."

"You were quite right," was the reply; "I do not feel equal to support such a day's labour."

"It will not be at all easy to manage," said Edith carelessly; "but I will see what I can do."

Laura looked and felt hurt. "Oh! pray don't put yourself out of your way for me; I should be quite distressed if you were to do it."

"My dear," said Mrs Courtenay, "Edith will like it. Nothing is so pleasant as to sit at home and see one's friends, and have a pleasant chat, when one is strong enough."

Edith did not echo the sentiment; but merely repeated that "she would see what could be done, only she could not promise;" and Laura, after again begging her not to inconvenience herself, wished them "good night," and returned to the park.

CHAPTER X.

"I HAVE been looking forward to this introduction with so much pleasure," said Miss Forester, as she glided into the drawing-room at Allingham, accompanied by Mr Dacre. Laura slightly bowed, and acknowledging the compliment, made the usual observations on the state of the weather.

"Yes, it is very gloomy without; but with so much comfort within, one easily forgets that the day is stormy. You don't venture out, I suppose, unless it is fine."

"I have not done so yet; but Mr Courtenay laughs at my fears, and says that people who brave the weather seldom take cold."

"That is so exactly a gentleman's speech. They never give ladies credit for any thing but rude health; and I suppose Mr Courtenay is inclined to think lightly on the subject, from the example of his sister Edith: she goes out at all times."

"A very good practice," said Mr Dacre.

"Admirable. I have often envied Miss Courtenay's resolution, and lamented that my indifferent health prevents my following the example."

There was a short pause, interrupted only by Mr Dacre's dry cough. "Have you been much in this neighbourhood before?" he said, turning to Laura.

"No, never; and I am longing for the spring: they tell me that the scenery is beautiful."

"Oh lovely, perfectly lovely," echoed Miss Forester; "but it may not please you as it does us, for you will find the most charming spots around your own door. We consider Allingham the gem of the county."

Laura's good taste revolted against the flattery, and she took no notice of it.

"There is a pleasure in novelty," continued Mr Dacre, "which to some minds counterbalances every thing."

"I am not sure that it would to mine," replied Laura. "From having lived all my life in one home, I cannot fancy any place delightful without some association attached to it."

"But it need not necessarily be a long one," said Mr Dacre. "There are feelings which can do the work of years, and we may hope," he added kindly and earnestly, "that your first associations with Allingham will invest it with a charm beyond all other places."

Laura felt that the wish was sincere, and her interest in her visitors was increased. "I am fortunate in one respect," she said, "that my expectations were not too highly raised; Mr Courtenay was especially guarded in his descriptions."

"That is so like him," softly murmured Miss Forester; "he is so very thoughtful upon all subjects."

"Thank you," said Laura, smiling; "he ought to be here to thank you himself."

"Mr Courtenay is coming towards the house now, is he not?" asked Mr Dacre, looking out of the window.

Miss Forester appeared surprised. "I was not aware that you were acquainted, my dear sir."

"We have met once before," was the reply; "but it is not very probable that Mr Courtenay will recollect me." Edward however did recollect, and as he shook hands, made an allusion to their former acquaintance; yet there was a slight confusion in his manner, and an attentive observer might have discovered, that the circumstances recalled by the sight of Mr Dacre were not perfectly agreeable.

The awkwardness however soon wore off, and the conversation flowed rapidly and agreeably. The Continent, its scenery and customs, and the comparison with English habits, were discussed for at least the third time that morning; but Mr Dacre's strong sense, and Edward's quickness of intellect, gave a superior tone to all that was said; and Laura listened with delight, and felt annoyed when the entrance of a servant with a note and a parcel interrupted their remarks.

"These are a few lines from Edith," she said, apologising for reading them: "she has sent me the duet we sang the other night, Edward, but she cannot come to us to-day; there is a school meeting in the way." Edward looked very much disappointed.

"Miss Courtenay is so much occupied," said Miss Forester, "that she has but little time at her own disposal, I imagine."

Edward was still grave and silent, and Laura felt uncomfortable. "Do you know this duet?" she said, taking up the music, and rejoiced at having found something to say.

"I have seen it, but I have only tried the second; indeed, I never sing any thing else—my voice is worth so little."

"I don't know when I shall learn it properly, Edward," said Laura, "if Edith is so much engaged. It requires to be practised together."

"She will not always be busy, my dear; you must have patience."

"It does require patience, certainly," said Miss Forester, "to wait for music; one is always so anxious to hear it in perfection immediately—at least, if I may judge from myself. It is quite a passion with me."

"I did not know that before," observed Mr Dacre: "you have not opened the piano since I have been at the Grange."

"Oh! that was because I knew you to be such a judge, and I was shy."

"I can scarcely understand how you could have known it. I have never mentioned music, and really can only tell what I like or dislike."

"But that is every thing with a correct taste; it is far beyond mere scientific knowledge."

"Experience must decide whether a taste is correct or not," continued Mr Dacre: "you will be a better judge of mine when you have had a specimen of it. I like 'Auld lang syne' much better than 'Tu che accendi.'"

"'Auld lang syne' is sweetly simple and touching, certainly; I have known some people quite overcome by it."

"I never was overcome," replied Mr Dacre; "if you mean crying."

Laura laughed. "At any rate," she said, "you would not confess it. I should like to try the experiment upon you some day."

A melancholy expression passed over Mr Dacre's face. He did not accept the challenge. Laura took up the duet, and looked at it disconsolately. "It is very tantalizing," she said, "and I never sing solos."

"Ah! that is just like me," observed Miss Forester; "perhaps—I hope I am not intruding, but it would give me so much pleasure if sometimes I could make myself useful, as a second, when the Miss Courtenays are engaged."

If Laura had watched her husband's countenance, she would have discovered that the proposal did not meet his wishes; but, bred up in indulgence, and having never been taught to consult any will but her own, she seldom considered it worth while to inquire what was thought of her actions; and Edward's fondness had hitherto caused him to see every thing she either did or said in so favourable a point of view,

that it seemed impossible he could object to any thing which suited her inclinations. Miss Forester's humble offer of making herself useful, was therefore accepted with pleasure; and not without a feeling of satisfaction in Laura's mind, from the consideration that there would be in consequence less claim upon Edith's time. Since she had proved herself either so unwilling, or so unable, to sacrifice her usual occupations, it would be equally irksome to make a second request, or provoking to be compelled to relinquish a favourite amusement. Without hesitation, therefore, Laura fixed an early day for a musical morning; and Miss Forester and her uncle took their leave.

"I wish you had consulted me before you made that arrangement, my dear Laura," said Edward, when they were left alone; "could you not see, by my manner, that I disapproved of it?"

"Perhaps I might have seen it if I had watched; but for such a trifle it did not seem worth while to ask advice. It must be entirely a matter of indifference to you."

"The choice of your society, my love, can never be a matter of indifference to me."

"That is absurd, Edward. Singing a duet with Miss Forester cannot be called choosing society."

"It is the first step to it. Music encourages intimacy more than any thing."

"But supposing I am intimate with Miss Forester, why should you object?"

"Ask yourself, my dear; the question will be easily answered by your own good sense. What is the impression you have received from Miss Forester's manners and conversation?"

"Oh! that she is a very good-natured sort of person; rather too soft and flattering to be perfectly ladylike; but very well. More agreeable, at any rate, than half the people one meets with."

"And these are sterling good qualities upon which it is safe to build a friendship?"

"You are so extreme in your conclusions, Edward. If we are to wait till we meet with perfection before we form acquaintances, we may as well become hermits. We must take the world as we find it. Besides, if I don't practise with Miss Forester, I shall lose my music entirely."

"You forget my sisters," said Edward.

"No, indeed, I don't;—but what can I do? Charlotte takes the same part that I do, Jane is an invalid, and Edith is busy."

"It is very provoking of Edith," exclaimed Edward, hastily. "But she would manage it, I am sure, if you were to ask it as a favour."

Laura drew up her long white neck, and looked very proud. "I am not in the habit of asking favours of any one; voluntary offers I am most grateful for, but a forced obligation is oppressive."

"But Edith cannot know how much pleasure she could give by a little arrangement of time."

"Yes, indeed, she does. You were not in the room when we were talking about it the other night. Your mother made the offer for her, but she did not second it; so I must entreat, Edward, that the subject is not mentioned to her again."

"I have a peculiar aversion to Miss Forester," said Edward, speaking his thoughts aloud; "almost a dread, she is so utterly insincere."

"Well!" said Laura, with a disappointed air; "it is not worth while to vex you about it. I will give up the notion, though I can't in the least see why you should object to my making her useful."

"Because usefulness between persons in the same rank of life implies familiarity. If we allow people to put themselves out of their way for us, we must do something for them in return. And this is all very

well where there is real regard; but, if not, there must be a pretence in the matter. Common civility will not satisfy a person who has been doing an uncommon kindness."

"You would do away with all the forms of society," said Laura, "if you would allow nothing but what is true. How many people are really dear to us, whom we call dear when we write to them?"

"Very few, probably; but then every one understands that. Dear, in a note, only means that you have a kindly feeling towards them."

"That you would not murder them," said Laura, laughing. "Well! perhaps you are right there. But about Miss Forester—I only want her to be dear in that sense."

"Then treat her as you do the rest of the world—be civil to her, but nothing more. If you once allow her to advance one step towards you, you must advance one step towards her; and if you don't, she will be offended; and if you do, you will be untrue. There is no alternative, that I can see."

"Poor Miss Forester!" said Laura; "there is little hope for her. She will never be admitted at Allingham."

"Not on the footing on which your practising mornings would place her, certainly."

"Then good-bye to my singing," said Laura, casting a wistful glance at the splendid piano.

"That is exaggerating the case, is it not?" said Edward. "You will soon learn to sing by yourself; and my sisters, as I said before, will practise with you whenever they can."

"Which will be never," exclaimed Laura, petulantly. "It is clear, Edward, you do not care to hear me sing."

"Oh! Laura, how unkind! If you only knew the delight it gives me."

"Are you in earnest?" she said, and a tear glistened

in her bright eye. Edward was much pained; it was the first tear he had seen since their marriage.

"I will not tell you how truly I am in earnest," he replied; "you would think that I exaggerated. Yet you would not for that reason have me consent to what is wrong."

"I do not wish you to consent to any thing, Edward, for a continuance. I only wish to try just for two or three times, and then you shall see how well I can manage to be quite civil without being hypocritical." Edward hesitated; and Laura's sweet smile showed that her hopes were raised. "We will meet half way," she said; "you shall let me follow my own wishes for the next fortnight or three weeks, and then we will have another discussion."

Still Edward hesitated. He knew that by yielding then, he was probably giving up the point entirely; but the compromise was all that was required at the moment; and too conscientious completely to sacrifice his judgment, too weak to say No, he laughingly observed that, "All the world would say he was governed by his wife;" and Laura was triumphant.

CHAPTER XI.

Miss Forester's proposal, as might easily be conjectured, was not entirely the result of disinterested kindness. It signified nothing to her whether the young bride were pleased or displeased, whether she sang or whether she were silent; but to be placed on an intimate footing at Allingham was an object of considerable importance. It involved amusement for her idle hours, of which she had very many; the enjoyment of luxuries without expense; and, most probably, influence over one who was likely to become the foremost in the society of the neighbourhood. Even in her childhood, Miss Forester had indulged in no dreams of ambition, for the success of which she was to depend on her own exertions. Her mind was of too low a stamp for the formation of those bright visions of fame, or rank, or magnificence, which, however delusive in themselves, imply a craving for enjoyments the world cannot give, and are often accompanied with an energy which may, when rightly directed, enable us to obtain them. She was not indeed insensible to their charms, but she sought them through the efforts of others, rather than through her own; and since the splendour of neither talent, rank, nor riches had been granted her in a degree equal to her wishes, she compensated for the deficiency by living as much as possible in the reflected light of those who were more fortunate than herself. She was mistaken, however, in supposing that Laura was entirely blinded by her flatteries, or willing to put faith in her sincerity. The real foundation of Laura's character was truth; and however the false cold

maxims of her home had corrupted her natural disposition, there still remained enough of simplicity and earnestness to render her easily alive to Miss Forester's artificial character. But beyond this she did not go. Knowledge and action had been so long disconnected in her mind, that the idea of checking an agreeable intimacy on account of its insincere foundation never suggested itself; for *right* was not on the list of Laura's motives. Of what was pleasant, she thought constantly; of what was necessary, she was forced to think occasionally; but what was right she seldom took the trouble to consider, except when Edward endeavoured to imbue her with some of his own principles; and then she listened, and smiled, and declared he was too good for the world—better than she ever imagined any one could be—so much better than herself that he quite frightened her; and Edward praised her ingenuousness, and delighted in her humility; and so the subject was dropped, and the good impression vanished as quickly as it had been made.

For some time, the resolution of holding Miss Forester at a distance, and only allowing her to be useful when the occasion offered, was carefully kept; and Laura frequently appealed to her husband to acknowledge how well she had estimated her powers, and how exactly she meted out the due measure of civility. But, as Edward had foreseen, a change, gradual, yet not the less perceptible, was after a time produced in the intimacy between Allingham and the Grange. Miss Forester was so extremely good-natured, so easily pleased, so full of anecdotes of Elsham and its vicinity, that Laura's suspicions of her sincerity faded by degrees away. No exertion was needed for her entertainment, for she usually came stored with some family or village history, "which must on no account be repeated, which she would not indeed have mentioned to any one except

her dear Mrs Courtenay, on whose judgment and secrecy she placed such implicit reliance;" and Laura, who, owing to Edward's engagements, passed many a solitary morning, was glad to escape from the irksomeness of worsted work, or the stupidity of a novel, or the fatigue of writing letters, to the excitement, false and petty though it was, of Miss Forester's tittle-tattle. The frequency of the visits at length, however, became so apparent, that Edward was obliged to enter his protest against them; but he was met by the same pleading looks, the same earnest assurances that the acquaintance should never go beyond the bounds of ordinary civility, together with complaints of solitary hours, and comparisons between Miss Forester's attentions and Edith's neglect.

"It is useless to make excuses for her, Edward," exclaimed Laura, at the termination of one of their frequent discussions upon her conduct. "I know all that you would say, and I believe it to be true. Edith is a most superior person; but it is that very superiority which prevents us from assimilating, and makes her shun me."

"My dear Laura, you are mistaken entirely; Edith does not shun you; but she is so engaged that she has very little time to bestow upon you."

"Whatever the reason may be, the effects are the same. We never meet, or at least, only just in the evening as a matter of propriety. As far as the Priory society goes, I might as well be living at Nova Scotia; and it really is hard, Edward, to be debarred from the company of the only person who is willing to take compassion upon my solitary mornings."

"But such a person! I should have thought that the loneliness of a few hours would have been paradise compared to the prattle of so very ordinary a person as Miss Forester."

"Perhaps it might be to a Latin and Greek scholar like yourself, or a saint like Edith; but I am neither the one nor the other; and you know, Edward, if you shut up a poor captive in a cell, he will create companionship for himself, even though it may be with flies and spiders."

"Rather a spacious cell, though," said Edward, as he looked round upon the handsome drawing-room, "and containing considerable stores of amusement; but I am surprised, Laura, at your dislike of being alone: I had your morning room fitted up purposely, because I thought you would enjoy retirement."

"I should be the first of my family who did, then," replied Laura, laughing; "and as to the morning room, it is perfect in its way—every one says so—but I cannot sit there till the cottage is gone. I feel like Aladdin in his fairy palace, only I have a roc's egg too much, instead of one too little."

"I have thought about it often, my love, since you first mentioned it; but, indeed, I see no remedy except patience."

"Which is the last remedy I am inclined to use. The wish is scarcely ever out of my mind."

"But I am sure, dearest, you will not indulge it at the expense of another's comfort?"

"How can I help it? The thoughts come whether I will or not."

"They may come, certainly, against your inclination; but it is at your own option whether they shall remain."

"Oh, no, Edward; I never can believe that. Actions may be ordered, but not thoughts."

"My dear Laura," exclaimed Edward, becoming graver than usual, "you forget: if we were left to ourselves, you might be right; but you know there is a higher strength than our own, which will

always be given us if we ask for it; and remember, in the Bible, evil thoughts are coupled with the greatest crimes."

"How can that be? they seem sent to us."

"So they may often be; but as we have it in our own power to cherish or reject them, we are responsible for them."

"I never shall understand," said Laura. "Thoughts and feelings have been my puzzle from my childhood."

"And, unhappily, they must be to the end of your life," replied Edward, smiling. "But we have proofs every day of our power over our own thoughts. If an idea is disagreeable, we turn from it."

"Yes, but instinctively; we cannot help ourselves."

"I beg your pardon; we merely obey our own will; and the same power which we exert then, is ours equally at all times. It is the will which is at fault; and one important reason for realising this truth is, that it enables us to study our own hearts so much more easily. Our feelings come and go, and we cannot recall them, but our thoughts are remembered without much difficulty, and by them we may try ourselves,—that is, we may judge whether we are improving, by seeing whether we encourage the good and reject the evil."

"So I shall not be good, I suppose, till I leave off thinking about that hideous cottage," said Laura, "and that will be a very long time. Even you yourself, Edward, wish it away."

"It is not the wish which is wrong, but the indulging it. You know that a wish is the germ of an action."

"It cannot be in this case. I might try for ever, and I should not be able to turn that tiresome old woman out of her house. That must be your doing."

"Yet, if you go on wishing, you will infallibly do all that you can. It is more dangerous for a man or a woman to play with wishes, than for a child to play with edged tools."

"I should care less if there were any hope," said Laura—"if I thought you would even hint at the subject."

"There would be no use in it," replied Edward; "I know old Martha better than you do."

Laura perceived symptoms of wavering in the tone in which this was spoken.

"A hint could not be wrong," she said, "and it would at least be satisfactory. It is so provoking to be obliged to sit down contentedly when no effort has been made to gain one's point."

"But you would not be contented even then," said Edward.

"That is prejudging; but I will not quarrel with you; though I own I am disappointed."

The word jarred painfully upon Edward's feelings of affection, and Laura saw it.

"I ask only for hope," she said, "that you should promise to try, if you find a fitting opportunity."

"Well, then, will you sit in your morning room, and like it?" he said, as he looked at her fondly.

Laura smiled, and was about to reply and thank him, when the sound of the hall bell interrupted the conversation; and a few moments afterwards Miss Forester's soft, sliding step, was heard in the passage. Edward seemed annoyed, and, taking up his hat, he opened the French window, and turning an angle of the house, was out of sight before Miss Forester entered.

"So very thoughtful! my dear Mrs Courtenay," was the first exclamation. "I am afraid I have intruded at a *mal-à-propos* moment."

"No, not at all, my meditations were not pecu-

liarly agreeable, since they were bordering upon impossibilities. I have been talking to Mr Courtenay upon the same subject which you and I discussed the other morning."

"The cottage? But surely that is not an impossibility!"

"Perhaps not precisely; but there are great difficulties in the way; and I can only make Edward say that he will give hints; he will take no active measures."

"Gentlemen are so tiresome," said Miss Forester, who well knew that few things are more winning than sympathy in a supposed grievance: "but he must own that it is frightful, and the view would be perfection without it."

"Yes, Edward fully allows its ugliness, though he does not hate it as I do. If I were master, it should not remain where it is another day."

"I suppose," continued Miss Forester, "that Mr Courtenay would not object to anything being done if the old woman's consent were gained first?"

"No; but how is that to be accomplished? He does not say that he will not interfere, but I can see he is not inclined to do it."

"Then, perhaps, he would prefer your saying something to sound the old woman. It would save his conscience, and might gain what he must desire nearly as much as yourself."

"I don't think that is likely, because Martha is proverbial for obstinacy and ill-humour."

"Then she certainly can have no claims upon your forbearance. Do you know her?"

"No; I have talked of going there several times, for Mr Courtenay has been rather anxious I should; but there are so many things to be done every day, and I am such a bad walker, that I have never yet been able to manage it."

"It is not far," said Miss Forester, "and the morning is delightful; so very fresh and bracing."

"I could not go without saying something to Edward first," replied Laura.

"Mr Courtenay's horse was standing ready saddled as I passed the stables," said Miss Forester, "so I conjectured he was going out this morning."

"Yes, he did intend it, but he can scarcely have set off yet; he was with me but a few minutes ago."

"I heard the trampling of horses' feet just now," continued Miss Forester. "Does Mr Courtenay wish particularly to accompany you when you pay your first visit to this old favourite?"

"Not that I am aware of; but there would be no good in seeing her if we did not suggest something about the cottage, which I really should not like to do."

"But it would not be necessary to speak openly; and, at any rate, a visit now would pave the way for future operations."

"That is true," replied Laura thoughtfully. "We might go and make friends, and by degrees prevail on her to yield; and, as you observed just now, Edward may prefer my taking the task off his hands, since he allows that it may be possible to give Martha a few hints, though he will have nothing done against her will."

"Exactly so. Mr Courtenay would be pleased rather than otherwise, I should think, to find that you had taken so much trouble about the poor old woman."

Laura's sincerity, at first, could not suffer an amiable motive to be falsely imputed to her; and she quickly disclaimed all idea of goodness, though still agreeing that it would be worth while to go, and that it might be of use in the end. A slight misgiving rested upon her mind as she went to prepare for

her walk, and once she recollected Edward's warnings against wishes; but as she was merely intending a kind, conciliatory visit, they did not seem precisely applicable; and when conscience again whispered that all was not right, she wilfully turned away from the consideration of her real motives, and soon almost persuaded herself that Miss Forester was correct, and that she really was about to do what her husband would entirely approve.

CHAPTER XII.

There was something of timidity and hesitation in Laura's gentle knock at old Martha's door; partly caused by her utter ignorance of the feelings and habits of the poor, and partly by the secret self-distrust which yet lingered in her heart. Miss Forester, however, participated in neither feeling; and finding that no answer was given, lifted the latch, and without further ceremony entered the cottage.

Martha was seated, in her usual position, on a low, half-broken elbow chair, by the side of the open hearth. A book was placed on the little round table beside her, but she did not appear to have been reading it; and, bending over the smouldering fire, she was busied only in watching the black pot suspended from a stick that crossed the wide chimney, and from time to time stretching out her withered hand to stir the burning logs, or to add fresh fuel from the basket of chips in the corner. An eye accustomed to the sight of poverty, would have traced symptoms of competence and comfort in the simple furniture of the room; in the short curtain hanging before the door, and the old-fashioned handsome clock, and mahogany chest, and neat dresser, with its range of pewter dishes and china cups and basins; but Laura, who from infancy had been carefully kept from all scenes but those of opulence and luxury, thought only that the cottage was low and dark; that the walls were smoke-dried; that the floor was uneven; and the furniture by no means sufficient for comfort.

"She must be glad to leave such a wretched hole," whispered Miss Forester; as she drew her dress

closely around her, and bent her head in an assumed fear lest it should touch the dingy rafters.

Martha raised herself from her crouching posture, and gazed with surprise on the intruders. Her strongly marked features, and the cold, stern expression of her thin lips, and dim grey eyes, startled Laura so much, that she forgot, for an instant, the necessary apology; and Miss Forester, feeling that the visit was not hers, was silent likewise; but Martha was not in the humour to wait patiently for an introduction.

"May be you'll be pleased to tell me what you're come here for," she said, in a harsh voice.

"We came to see you," replied Laura, gently; "I am Mrs Courtenay, of Allingham."

Martha's rigid features relaxed, and something which she intended to be a smile brightened her wrinkled face.—"Mrs Courtenay, are you? Master Edward's fine lady. Well! I'm glad you're here at last."

"I am sure you must be extremely grateful to Mrs Courtenay for walking so far to see you," suggested Miss Forester.

"Grateful! yes, I'm as grateful as most people where there's any thing to be grateful for; I'd be grateful to God first, and to Master Edward afterwards, and Miss Edith and the parson, but I don't know much about other folks."

"You are an old servant of Mrs Courtenay's family, are you not?" said Miss Forester; "you seem very comfortably provided for."

"May be I am," exclaimed Martha, turning sharply round; "I lived twenty years up at the Priory there, and worked for them night and day; so 'twould have been hard if they had not done something for me."

"I am sure Mr Courtenay would be very sorry

if he thought you were in want of any thing," observed Laura, anxious to soothe her.

"'Tisn't my way to doubt it," said Martha shortly.

"Mrs Courtenay will think you are not obliged for all that has been done for you, if you speak in that way," said Miss Forester; "she is not used to it."

"No! I daresay not; Tom Slater says that down at their fine place no one is thought any thing of that doesn't ride in a carriage."

"Who is Tom Slater?" asked Laura; wondering that any one at Elsham should profess an acquaintance with her home.

"Tom Slater is the head man who was at work up at the Hall there. Poor fellow: he and my Becky were to have made it up together, and then 'twould have been all very well; but the fever came, and Becky got ill, and when she was gone, 'twas all over with me in the way of being happy again! To have lived up at the Park would have been no pleasure then." Tears filled the old woman's eyes, and Laura's naturally kind feelings were touched; yet she could not forego the occasion of introducing some allusion to the object of her visit.

"Then, I suppose," she said, "it does not signify to you where you live now; one place must be just like another."

"Well! perhaps it is; but I never liked change; where I settled myself down, I chose always to stay."

"Only, I suppose," said Miss Forester, "that when the trouble of moving was over, you would not care."

Martha raised her head, and looked full in Miss Forester's face. "Are ye driving at any thing?" she said, her suspicions easily excited upon the subject which had lately been uppermost in her thoughts.

Laura felt a little abashed, but Miss Forester answered with nonchalance, "We were only anxious to know if you were well off here, or would be more comfortable elsewhere. Mrs Courtenay is extremely desirous that you should have every thing you may require."

"Is she?" said Martha. "I want nothing but to be left in peace where I am; and Mr Edward has promised me that."

"I suppose," said Miss Forester, "he only promised it, in case he could not find any place better suited for you. He could not have thought this dark room as good as many others in the neighbourhood."

"He never told me what he thought, but I told him what I thought; and if a dark room pleases me, 'tis no one's concern but my own."

"You forget," said Miss Forester, "that there are many persons who wish to see you well provided for: Mrs Courtenay for one, besides your own family."

"Who's the best judge of what's being well provided for?" said Martha. "No one knows my own mind like myself. If Mr Edward would order a pint of porter sometimes for Willie's little girl, I'd thank him; and a shilling or two for the family, I shouldn't say 'no' to; but I don't wish him to trouble about me."

"Does your son live far off?" asked Laura.

"Something about half a mile; but he generally contrives to see me every day; or one of the children comes to me."

"If you were close to them you would be more comfortable, surely," said Miss Forester; "you must spend so many hours alone."

"It's best for an old woman like me: the children are noisy, and I can't bear them for long."

Laura could scarcely help smiling at the perti-

nacity with which Martha refuted all the objections that could be made to her present situation; but the very difficulty of success served to increase her anxiety, and she sat for a few moments in silence, endeavouring to discover some new point of attack. Martha, finding that the conversation had dropped, turned again to the fire; and Miss Forester walked towards the door, unwilling to take any more trouble in a cause which did not materially affect her own personal comfort.

Martha was the first to break the silence, with a remark which plainly showed she desired the departure of her visitors. "It's getting on late," she said; "my bit of meat will be ready by twelve o'clock; and I thought Miss Edith would have been here before,—she said she would."

"Do you expect Miss Courtenay, then?" said Laura, half alarmed at the prospect of a rencontre with her sister-in-law.

"It's her day for coming, and she most times keeps true to her word."

"Don't you think we had better think of returning?" said Miss Forester, entirely participating in Mrs Courtenay's feelings.

Laura moved, with the intention of wishing good-bye. The few civil words at parting were quickly said: and she thought they were safe; but Edith, true to the appointment, approached the cottage just as they were leaving it; and the meeting was unavoidable. At another time, Laura might have felt indifferent to the smile on Edith's face, and to her expressions of pleasure that she should have taken the trouble to visit a poor person; but now, with the consciousness of a selfish motive, they sounded reproachfully, and the tone of her own reply was hurried, and to Edith's ear ungracious.

"It is the first day I have been able to walk so

early," she said, "and I daresay I shall not do so again for some time."

"Oh! yes, I am sure you will, since you have once begun," replied Edith, kindly; "it is but the first effort that is difficult."

"There is nothing very alluring in the occupation," observed Miss Forester, "when only discontent and rudeness are to be met with."

Edith almost started. In her surprise at meeting her sister-in-law, she had scarcely thought who was her companion; but the well-known voice brought the fact forcibly before her; and her satisfaction in the meeting was considerably damped.

"Martha is not very civil, certainly," she said; "but there are great allowances to be made for her; she had no education, and was early soured by misfortunes; and her heart is much softer and more grateful than it appears."

"It may be so," said Laura carelessly; "but I wish you would give her a lesson in good manners. It will be long before I am tempted to come again."

"But," said Edith, "when your motive is kindness, her civility cannot make any difference to you, except in the pleasure you receive. It is rather an additional reason, indeed, for seeing her often, and teaching her better."

"Oh! I leave that to you; besides"—and Laura slightly coloured—"I don't wish you to think me better than I am, Edith; my motive was not entirely kindness."

Edith looked surprised, but did not know what reply to make; and Miss Forester felt bewildered by a candour, to which there was no counterpart in her own breast.

"I should really feel obliged to you. Edith," continued Laura, speaking very quickly, "if you could find some means of persuading that tiresome old

woman to move out of her cottage; she is beyond hints."

"Oh! Laura," exclaimed Edith indignantly, "you have not been saying anything! remember Edward's promise —— It would be so very wrong to urge the point."

"Perhaps I am an equally good judge with yourself as to the right or wrong of the case," replied Laura, in a cold, proud tone,—which proved that her transient fit of humility had vanished before her sister's reproach. "I have given no hints that could be understood, or inflict the least pain, and you may be sure that Edward will be a very safe guardian of his own promise."

"He will intend to be," replied Edith; "but you cannot be ignorant of your influence, Laura."

"I think too highly of him to suppose I could make him do anything he considered wrong," said Laura; "but you seem to have a more unfavourable opinion."

The assertion was provoking, from the mixture of unpleasant truth it contained; for, doubtful as Edith had lately been of her brother's firmness, she did not always acknowledge it to herself.

"Whether your power over Edward is great or small," she replied, "it ought equally to be exerted rightly; and you cannot really think it would be justifiable to ask any one to do a thing they had promised not to do."

"Really, Edith," exclaimed Laura, "I must discuss the subject another time; it is too cold this morning to stand so long in the open air—so good-bye."

"Good-bye," replied Edith, in a calm tone, which told little of her real feelings; and with a distant bow to Miss Forester, she walked towards the cottage.

"So you're come at last," was Martha's salutation. "If you'd been here a minute before, you'd have seen Master Edward's lady."

"I have just seen her, nurse; we parted only ten yards from your door."

"Then, may be, Miss Edith, you can tell me what she came for; it's more than I can."

"Oh! it is not very difficult to imagine," said Edith, striving to evade the question. "Being my brother's nurse, she must naturally feel interested about you."

"But it wasn't that," said Martha, as she fixed her keen eye upon Edith. "She didn't come for nothing—I'm sure she didn't—and her talk wasn't like it. Nothing of asking for the rheumatism, or the pigs, or how I slept, and such like things,—only speering to know if I shouldn't like to change house. May be, Miss Edith, she means that I shall, whether I like it or not."

"You must not be fanciful, Martha," said Edith; "why don't you think that I have some motive for coming here?"

"Because it wouldn't be like you," said Martha, as she took Edith's hand in hers; "it wasn't like you when you was a child; and I'm sure it isn't like you now, for all the village says there's no one that thinks of them as you do—only the parson and his lady."

"But you must not praise me, and think unkindly of my sister," said Edith; "she won't be willing to come here again, if you are not more pleased to see her."

"I shouldn't mind so much if she was to come alone," said Martha; "but that Miss that was with her, no one ever found any good where she was. All the people for twenty miles round would tell you so; she is always prying and fault-finding, and doing some mischief."

"Hush! hush! Martha," said Edith; "you know we are told not to speak evil of our neighbours."

"It isn't evil," said Martha; "only what's true. They never give away to the value of a brass farthing up at the Grange."

"But it may be evil though it is true," replied Edith; "and the less we speak of other people's faults the better."

"Well, then, I won't say no more about her—only I never knew her to be seen any where but what mischief was sure to follow after; and so 'twill be now, as certain as I'm living."

Martha's tones were so raised by the excitement into which she was working herself, that Edith did not hear the sound of approaching footsteps; and the first notice she received of the presence of a third person, was by a hand laid upon her shoulder, while Edward's voice asked "how long she had been there."

Edith's face brightened with pleasure. In his presence the charm of his society made her forget her doubts and disappointments, except when painfully reminded of them by Laura's conversation, or his own inconsistencies; and at that instant, when she thought that he was no partner in his wife's selfishness, the deep, pure love of her childhood, the love which years, and absence, and opposing interests may stifle, but can never extinguish, rose in its full force, and with a warmth which lately had been seldom shown, she expressed her delight at their meeting.

"One would think you'd had been over the seas," said old Martha, not entirely pleased at being made of secondary importance: "I daresay now you was together all day yesterday."

"No indeed," said Edith; "nor the day before, nor the day before that; we are becoming quite strangers to what we once were."

"And whose fault is it, Edith?" said Edward, kindly, yet gravely. "Not mine: you know the Hall is your home, at all seasons and all hours."

"Nor mine," replied Edith; "circumstances cannot be avoided."

"So we think when we do not make the effort: but we will talk of that by-and-by. I want to know how you are, Martha: how is the rheumatism? You must be feeling it again now, I should fear; the weather has been so damp till to-day."

"Yes, it's bad enough sometimes," said Martha, in a less sulky tone than usual; "but it's not like last winter. The curtain up there keeps out a deal of air."

"That was your thought, Edith," said Edward; "it would never have entered my head; but is the cottage comfortable, Martha?—you used to say it smoked."

"So it does still with a north-easter, but somehow I'm got used to it, and a little of it seems thick and snug."

"That is a novel notion," said Edward, laughing; "but you have turned over a new leaf since you came here, Martha, and are determined to make the best of every thing."

The old woman smiled grimly, as she answered,—"No, no, Master Edward, that never was my way yet: but I don't care for things so much as I used, only for being quiet. A long life's a long journey, and one is glad to sit down at the end of it."

"Still I can't help wishing you had a more comfortable resting-place," observed Edward. "A little more light, for instance, would be an advantage."

"So Tom Slater says, when he comes here and talks about the cottage at the end of the lane; but I tells him to let me be quiet, for you've promised I shan't move unless it pleases me, and I'm sure it

never will. As for the light, there's a very good place for another window just behind the door, if so be as you're inclined for it."

This did not exactly meet Edward's wishes. During his solitary ride he had been pondering much upon his conversation with Laura, and longing to devise some plan for gratifying her; and although without any intention of breaking his word, or forcing his old nurse to consent to what might be against her notions of comfort, the desire of pleasing his wife became upon consideration so strong, that after a little hesitation, he turned his horse's head in the direction of Martha's cottage, with the determination of sounding her upon the subject of the exchange. She seemed, however, more bent than ever upon being satisfied on this one point, though discontented on almost every other, and Edward felt irritated as the conversation proceeded, and as he found how insuperable a barrier lay between his inclination and his duty; and breaking off abruptly in the middle of a sentence, he exclaimed, "Well, Martha, I see you are resolved to live and die where you are; but if you were nearer to us it would be better: Mrs Courtenay would be able to see you oftener then."

"Laura has been here this morning," said Edith: "we parted just before you came."

"Has she indeed?" exclaimed Edward, with evident pleasure. "That is so like her—doing the very things she knows I most wish, yet so secretly that I can never find them out till afterwards. You must go with her, Edith, now she has once begun seeing the poor people; she will want some one to introduce her."

Edith looked grave, and was silent.

"I don't think your young madam is much used to poor folks," said Martha: "she didn't seem to know what to do with herself when she came."

"She was shy, I daresay, at a first visit," replied Edward; "but she will be delighted to send any thing for you that you may want from the Hall, and I am sure she will come and see you frequently."

"Don't let her come with that Miss from the Grange then," said Martha: "nobody wants her—there's always mischief at her heels."

"Was Miss Forester here too?" asked Edward, turning to his sister, and speaking quickly. "What could have induced Laura to bring her?"

"I only spoke to them for a minute," replied Edith, "and had no time to ask questions; but I wonder you are surprised: Miss Forester is always at the Hall."

Edward frowned and bit his lip, scarcely knowing whether to be most provoked with Miss Forester's visits, or his sister's observations. "Did the ladies stay with you long, Martha?" he said.

"Oh no; just while they were putting some questions about the cottage, and my liking it, as you might have been doing but now, Master Edward. They didn't seem to care for any thing but that; and if you please to ask them when you gets home, they'll be sure to tell you they was driving at something. They didn't come here for nothing, not they. That Miss never went nowhere for nothing."

"What does she mean, Edith?" said Edward, taking his sister aside. "What has Laura been doing?"

"Really I cannot say. As I told you, I only met her at the door, and then she seemed annoyed at Martha's manner, and asked me to find some way of making her consent to leave her cottage."

Edward took up his hat as if to go away, but suddenly recollecting himself, exclaimed, "I have no time to stay any longer, nurse,—I shall come another day, so good-bye now. Edith, you will

walk home with me." And they left the cottage together. Martha looked after them for a few moments in considerable surprise, and then with a raised hand and a muttered ejaculation—"Hugh! what's come over the young things? they're up and off like a windy day,"—she drew her chair nearer the hearth, and began her preparations for dinner.

CHAPTER XIII.

Edith and her brother continued their walk for some little distance without speaking; but Edward's quick step and impatient flourish of his whip, as he demolished every thistle and bramble within his reach, showed that his feelings were not quite calm. "What can be done?" he exclaimed at length, partly addressing himself to Edith, and partly giving utterance to his secret thoughts. "She is the last person Laura ought to be with."

"Who?" asked Edith quietly.

"Why do you ask, Edith? There is but one person in the neighbourhood whom we really dislike, and it is so provoking that Laura should have taken such a fancy to her."

"And still more provoking that she should be led by her," observed Edith. "I am certain Miss Forester was at the bottom of that visit to old Martha."

"You must be mistaken there," said Edward. "Laura would not take any steps about the cottage without consulting me, and she knows my determination. I will never trust any one but myself to sound Martha upon the subject; she is so keen that she would see through it at once, and think I meant to break my word; and indeed it would be useless: I went as far as I dared just now, and it was evident that she will never willingly move."

"Certainly," replied Edith, "nothing could be more clear; but I don't think I am mistaken in supposing that Laura wished to induce her to consent. In fact, she implied as much in the short

conversation we had together, and I was longing to see you, Edward, to speak about it."

"You don't mean," exclaimed Edward, pausing abruptly in his walk, "that you imagined for one instant that any persuasions could induce me to break my promise?"

"Not exactly," replied Edith, hesitatingly, not choosing to inquire to what extent she had learnt to distrust him; "but the very idea would be painful to poor old Martha, and I don't think Laura perceives this; and she might wish you to propose, though not to urge it."

"And you don't think I have firmness to refuse," said Edward. "That is not what I should have expected from you."

The tears rose to Edith's eyes, and her voice slightly faltered, as she answered hastily,—"I don't know what you ought to expect now, Edward; it is all so changed."

"What do you mean? who is changed?—not myself, I am sure. Tell me what you mean."

"Nothing—nonsense. There is no good in talking of it: we cannot make things as they once were: and you would not wish it."

"But you would," said Edward, in a grave, reproachful tone.

Edith was silent.

"It is your own fault, Edith," he continued. "The change, if there is a change, is in yourself. The love which was yours before I married, is yours still. Allingham may be your home now, as it was then; but you refuse it; you estrange yourself from us, and then complain of alterations."

"No, Edward," exclaimed Edith; "I do not complain—I never could—I have no right—your choice was your own, and no one can blame you for consulting your own happiness."

"Then why is there this reserve between us?" asked Edward. "We have often talked of my marriage as a thing of course—no one could have entered more warmly into my feelings. Why should you shut yourself up from me now, and shun the society of the person I flattered myself would have been as dear to you as your own sisters?"

"I do not shun any one," replied Edith; "but I have many occupations, and but little time to myself; and my society is not likely to give Laura any pleasure."

"That will not deceive me," said Edward; "constrained humility never can."

"I don't wish to deceive any one," replied Edith, with something of haughtiness; "but if persons are unlike in taste and disposition, it is vain to hope they will ever assimilate."

"Certainly not, if they resolutely determine that there shall be no neutral ground upon which to meet —and this seems to be your case."

"There can be no neutral ground formed, where none exists," said Edith: "but we are talking foolishly, Edward; you can never understand, and I can scarcely desire that you should."

"But, indeed, I do understand," replied Edward; "you fancy that Laura, because she has been bred up with London notions, cannot enter into yours; but she can into mine—and once, Edith, that would have been sufficient."

"Yes, once—once," exclaimed Edith, eagerly, but!"—— and she paused.

"Why should you hesitate?" continued her brother: "my most earnest wish is, that you should speak to me without reserve."

"It is impossible!" said Edith. "And I know I am wrong—I ought not to grieve over a disappointment which is a mere trifle, compared with what

others suffer. If you are happy, Edward, I will be so too."

"You are unintelligible," replied Edward. "Where is the disappointment you speak of? Is it in my affection?"

"Oh! no—no—but pray do not let us talk any more about it! it can only be painful to both."

"Nothing can be so painful as reserve between those who once shared every thought," said Edward; "imagination always conjures up worse visions than reality."

"Not always;" and Edith sighed deeply.

"I cannot bear this, Edith," exclaimed her brother impatiently. "You know me too well to believe that I can. If you have any complaint to make of me or of Laura, I must entreat that you will speak openly."

"I have said before that I have nothing to complain of," replied Edith, with forced calmness; "but, Edward, you are unreasonable to expect that I can tell you every thing I think and feel, now, as I did before your marriage. Our positions are totally changed."

"They are, indeed," exclaimed Edward: "more so than I could have imagined possible. I am only thankful there is still one person in the world who has no mysteries with me."

Edith turned away in bitterness of heart, and then, giving way to the hasty feeling of the moment, "If you are satisfied with your wife, Edward," she said, "it is enough. Whatever I may think can be a matter of no consequence."

"But it is—it must be a matter of consequence," he exclaimed. "How can I endure to see one who is dearer to me than my own life, misunderstood and depreciated by those who ought to love and delight in her."

"Ought!" repeated Edith, ironically.

"Yes, ought!" continued Edward, "if gentleness, and temper, and grace, and all that can make a woman amiable, are to be loved and admired, then Laura *ought* to have your warmest affection."

The irritable feelings working in Edith's mind were completely roused by what she saw to be the blind ness and error of the assertion; and forgetting the delicacy of her position, and the respect due to her brother's feelings, she exclaimed: "If gentleness consists in being led by no one but Miss Forester, and amiability in wishing to turn old Martha out of her cottage, few can give Laura more credit for both than myself."

The words were no sooner uttered than they were repented of; but the wish to efface their impression was as vain as the endeavour to recall them.

Edward's face became very pale, and his brows were closely knit. He did not trust himself with a reply; and making a sudden leap over a style near him, walked with rapid strides across the adjoining field, and Edith was left alone to her meditations.

CHAPTER XIV.

LAURA'S glance at her husband, as he entered the dressing-room in which she was resting after the exertion of her unusually long walk, convinced her that something had occurred to annoy him; and her conscience reminded her instantly of her offence, not indeed against his commands, but against his wishes. In general, she would have risen with delight to meet him, and her book would have been thrown aside without regret; but now, with a faint smile, she merely observed that he was quickly returned, and then, fixing her eye on the page before her, appeared engrossed with its contents. She was wrong, however, in imagining herself the sole or even the principal subject of his angry feelings. By far the larger share was bestowed upon Edith; yet the truth contained in the observation that had so deeply excited him, was too evident to be entirely withstood; and although, while retracing his steps homeward, his quick and varying thoughts had found ample cause for indignation at his sister's unkindness, their bitterness was increased by the consciousness that her reproach was not without foundation. Blindly and devotedly as he loved his wife, Edward was still, in some measure, alive to her faults; but there was a wide difference between an acknowledgment made in the secrecy of his own heart, and Edith's open accusation; and the faults which, from their apparently trifling character, were allowed, when observed only by himself, seemed unjustly magnified when they excited the attention of another. Resentment against his sister, therefore, was the feeling uppermost in his mind; and it was

one which he scarcely endeavoured to check, since it sprang from a sense of his wife's wrongs rather than his own; and the first glimpse of Laura's beautiful features tended considerably to increase his irritation against one who had proved insensible to her fascination. For a short time he stood at the window, watching her in silence; and at last, annoyed at the change in her manner, said, with something of severity—

"Your book must be peculiarly interesting, Laura."

"Yes! it is—very"—she replied, hastily, and not daring to lift her eyes to his.

"Are you tired, that you are lying down?"

"Tired? yes—no—not particularly—only I have been walking."

"So I suppose: did you go far?"

"Yes—that is, not any great distance—I don't know exactly what you call far"—and Laura gazed again upon her book: but her natural ingenuousness overcame her timidity, and throwing down the volume, she rose from the sofa, and said, after some hesitation, "I went with Miss Forester to see your old nurse."

Edward's features did not relax, and his voice was even graver than before.

"If you had asked me," he answered, "there would have been no occasion for Miss Forester's services; it must have been a sudden freak."

"You are vexed with me, Edward," said Laura; "I wish you would tell me so at once."

"There can be no occasion for it, since it is so evident. It cannot be a matter of surprise to you that I am annoyed at your preferring Miss Forester's society to mine."

"Oh, Edward! that is unjust—more than unjust—it is cruel; but you do not mean it."

"I merely reason from facts. You knew that it was only necessary to express a wish, and I should

have been delighted to go with you. I have been urging the visit for the last three weeks without success; but I must ask Miss Forester the secret of her eloquence, when I wish to gain my point another time."

"This is nonsense, Edward," replied Laura; "you are not really jealous of Miss Forester's influence, or of any other person's. The idea is too absurd to make me angry. It would be much kinder to tell me plainly what is the matter."

"I leave it to you to find out," he said; "if you are unconscious of having done any thing against my wishes, of course I am mistaken."

Laura became pale, and her voice was tremulous as she replied, "I did not expect this from you, Edward. I thought our agreement was one of openness and sincerity on each side. But I will not be the one to forget it," she continued, in a firmer tone; "I have been wishing for something which you desired me not to think of; I have been longing to get rid of the cottage, and I have been sounding old Martha about it, but I have done nothing more; and I should not have ventured even upon that, if you had not almost promised me you would give her a hint yourself. If it is a fault, it is one easily repaired."

"Oh, Laura!" exclaimed her husband, his displeasure vanishing before the ingenuousness of the avowal; "why will you not show yourself to every one such as you are to me? Why will you give rise to observations and misconstructions, and cause me the great pain I have experienced this morning? I felt Edith was harsh, and yet she said nothing but what was true."

"Edith!" repeated Laura, in surprise; "your sister! I knew she did not love me, yet she need not have spoken against me to my husband;" and Laura's tears flowed fast as she spoke.

"That need not be a cause of grief, dearest," replied Edward; "the whole world might speak against you, without causing the slightest shade of variation in my love; but there is something which ought to pain you, as it does me—that you should act in a way to give rise to any unkind observation."

"But how—why—what have I done?" exclaimed Laura, raising her head; "why should Edith interfere, and make remarks? I will confess to you, Edward, where I have gone contrary to your wishes; and I will bear any thing and every thing you may choose to say; but I will never submit to have my actions commented on by any other human being, much less one who has shown me so little kindness as Edith."

"It is what we must all submit to," replied Edward; "the world, and our relations, and our friends, will comment upon our actions, whether we will submit to it or not; it is vain to hope that we can escape unnoticed; but nothing that is said against us can be of any consequence, unless it is well founded."

"And what did Edith say?" asked Laura, eagerly.

"She implied that you suffered yourself to be led by Miss Forester; and she added something about your want of consideration for poor old Martha, which it was most painful to me to listen to."

"And she heard it from myself," exclaimed Laura; "I said a little to her on the subject, merely because she should not give me credit for better motives than I deserved; and then she turned my own words against me, to injure me in my husband's estimation. Is this your pattern sister, Edward?"

"Not to injure you in your husband's estimation," replied Edward, fondly. "No one can do that but yourself."

"Yet you believed her, and felt angry with me."

"I had reason to believe her. Miss Forester's intimacy is daily before my eyes; and the motive of your visit to old Martha you had acknowledged yourself."

"Miss Forester would never speak against me behind my back," replied Laura. "Whatever her faults may be, she will not endeavour to make mischief between us; and as to your old nurse, it is absurd to make a fuss about such a trifle. I merely asked a few questions as to whether she was comfortable in her cottage, in order to find out whether she would be inclined to move; and she was extremely ungracious and disagreeable, and then I went away."

"It would have been rather better to have waited, would it not?" asked Edward: "I had not forgotten your wishes, and went myself for the same purpose; and I was much the most proper person to do it."

"Perhaps you were," said Laura; "but you must own, Edward, that it was a very tiny fault, and extremely unkind of Edith to say any thing to you about it."

"I don't think you meant any great harm, certainly," replied Edward, delighted to be relieved from the feeling of vexation against her; "but you must be more careful another time."

"Yes, believe me," exclaimed Laura; "I will never commit myself again. Since I know how my words are to be turned against me, I will be more sparing of them. Your sister shall not be troubled for the future with either my conversation or my society."

"Hush! my love," replied Edward; "this is not kind to me. The first wish of my heart is that you should be loved and cherished by my own family."

"Do not wish it," said Laura, sadly; "it will never be."

"It must be," replied her husband. "It is impossible they should be insensible to ——"

"To what?" asked Laura, archly; "I like of all things to hear my own praises."

Edward only answered by a kiss; and immediately afterwards left the room, with his feelings calmed, but with a bitter recollection of Edith's remarks, and a keener sense than ever of the neglect shown to his young wife.

CHAPTER XV.

It is interesting and useful, though often very painful, to retire into ourselves, after the first tumult of excited feelings has subsided, and consider the probable consequences of our words and actions. We may indeed frequently be mistaken, and magnify or diminish the importance of what has occurred; or look forward to events that may never happen; but by endeavouring to connect the past and the future, we strengthen a habit of thoughtfulness, and are able to trace more easily the secret sources of the sufferings which so frequently arise, apparently from the ignorance or selfishness of our fellow-creatures, but in reality from some error in ourselves. The conversation between Edith and her brother was not of a nature to be speedily forgotten by either, but the pain it had occasioned was most acutely felt by the former; and when she recurred to her unguarded expressions, and their probable effect upon Edward's mind, all feeling of displeasure against him or Laura gave way before her own self-reproach. She would willingly have made any sacrifice to efface the impression of those few hasty words—for it was easy to foresee that they would probably create a barrier which years even might not be able to remove; and bitter was her regret for the weakness which had induced her to yield to an angry impulse. It was impossible to suppose that Edward would overlook and make allowances, for his feelings had been wounded in the tenderest point. If she attempted to be kinder than usual, he might think her insincere; and if she were cold as before, the breach must effectually be widened.

It was Edith's first lesson in the importance of words —in the fearful power which we possess of giving a body, as it were, to the thoughts within us, but a body which we are unable to destroy. Her repentance seemed as if it could be of no avail in preventing the natural consequences of her folly; and she looked forward with shame and repugnance to the next meeting with her brother and sister. The awkwardness, which was equally felt by them, caused several days to elapse before it took place; but having no excuse to offer for not going to the Priory, Edward at length prevailed on Laura to overcome her unwillingness and accompany him, with the secret hope that Edith might be absent. His wish, however, was not gratified. Luncheon was rather later than usual; and the footman, ignorant of the effect produced by his words, informed them that Mrs Courtenay and the young ladies were in the dining-room.

"Just in time, my dear," was Mrs Courtenay's salutation. "We are so glad—I was only that instant saying what an age it was since you had been here."

"It is rather long," began Laura.

"Long, my love! it seems a twelvemonth. But I won't complain. Now, do Edith—no, not Edith, she has a toothach, poor child—Jane, you can ring the bell. Johnson never will bring up knives and forks enough."

"I think there are some more on the side-table," said Jane, languidly, turning her head. "Isn't it bitterly cold to-day?"

"Not bitterly," replied Edward; "rather bracing it is, certainly; I suppose, Edith, it is the cold which has given you the pain in your face."

Edward tried to be unconstrained; but Edith felt it was an effort, and her answer was given in the same tone—

"Perhaps it may be; but it is not of any consequence."

"Oh, my dear, don't say so!" exclaimed her mother; "nobody knows; and it is so much better to take things in time: you know it may turn to tic-douloureux any day."

"Is it very bad?" inquired Laura, feeling more grateful to a toothach than she had ever done before.

"Oh no, it is a mere nothing," said Edith in the same reserved tone as before; and she rose as if to leave the room.

"You are not thinking of going out, of course, Edith," said Charlotte; "it would be madness."

"I don't know exactly: I ought to go if I could, and my face is better now."

"A martyr, as usual," exclaimed Charlotte; "what a pity it is that you had not lived in Queen Mary's reign! I don't know any one who would have made a better figure at the stake."

"You would not be so foolish, Edith," said Edward; "nothing is more likely to make you worse than this north-east wind. It is not fit for you to venture out."

"That is right, my dear," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay; "do try your influence; nobody has so much: I often say that you have more power over Edith than all the world besides."

"Had more power, you should say," replied Edward, with a quiet emphasis, understood only by two of the party.

"I don't know why you should say that, my dear, except, perhaps, that now you are married, there are two persons for Edith to listen to, instead of one. Laura, I wish you would say something. Edith observed only the other day, that you never set your heart upon doing anything without accomplishing it."

The colour mounted to Laura's cheek, and after a moment's pause she said coldly—

"I could not be so presumptuous as to suppose ——" the end of the sentence was lost, for the speaker took up a glass of water, being apparently seized with a violent thirst.

"I don't know what you all mean," said Jane, as she moved her chair from the fire to discover the cause of the silence; "but it seems to me that we are remarkably polite to each other; so polite that one could almost fancy we were on the point of being otherwise."

"I am the cause, I am afraid," said Edith; "but I very much wish no one would trouble themselves about me; I shall do extremely well; and really I must go."

Mrs Courtenay sighed, and looked resigned, and Charlotte coughed, and looked provoked.

"You may take the club-book with you, if you will go," she said; "we shall have to pay a fine as it is."

"I have not finished it yet," replied Edith; "one day will not make much difference."

"Why not stay at home, then, and do it now? It would be much better."

"No, I don't feel that I could attend; and indeed I never can understand heavy books, except at night."

"But you do not mean, my love," said Mrs Courtenay, with a start of horror, "that you ever sit up at night, reading."

"Oh yes, frequently," replied Edith; "but there is no fear, I assure you; I am extremely careful."

"It is very well to talk," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay, with a degree of energy unusual to her; "we shall be burnt, I know we shall; it is in the family."

There was a general laugh, in which Edith could not help joining. But Mrs Courtenay did not at all understand the cause of the amusement, and imme-

diately began citing cases to prove the correctness of her assertion.

"My dear Edward, you must remember old Sir Lionel Courtenay, in Henry VIII.'s time,—he was burnt at the stake. And there was his grandson, in Queen Mary's; and your two little cousins, last year, in Kent. So Edith, I must beg you won't read any more by candle-light. You know quite enough."

"At all events," said Edith smiling, "I don't think I can take the club-book; it is so large."

"We might drive her to Elsham," said Laura to her husband in a low voice.

Edward hesitated. The tone of his family had seldom struck him so forcibly, and he was not inclined for Edith's company. Laura, however, repeated the suggestion, and finding that he did not object, followed Edith, to make her the offer.

It was decidedly refused; and Laura felt as if her overtures of peace had been rejected. Yet Edith's manner, cold and constrained as it seemed, was by no means an index to her heart. She was fully conscious of her own ungraciousness: and if Laura had been in the wrong, instead of herself, she would have been the first to make an advance towards reconciliation. But now, unable to conquer the feeling of shyness, arising from self-reproach, she hurried away to her own room, and the estrangement between the sisters-in-law was completed. Laura, piqued and disappointed, returned to the dining-room, resolving never again to attempt being on any terms with Edith but those of politeness—a resolution which her good nature would, under other circumstances, have made it rather difficult to keep. For some time, indeed, she refrained from visiting the Priory more frequently than was absolutely necessary; and when in Edith's company avoided any conversation with her. But the first irritation of feeling by degrees subsided; and

with a disposition incapable of long retaining the sense of injury, she might easily have been won over to cordiality, if Edith had only known how to redeem her past mistakes. But of this, unfortunately, she was ignorant. Though freely acknowledging her fault in the one instance which had openly separated them, she was not aware that a fundamental error lay at the root of all her actions—the belief that family duties are of secondary importance; and the result was a continued series of petty neglects, which Laura's quick perception, and hasty, though generous temper, could not fail to resent. The breach, however, was not perceptible to the world in general, and scarcely even at the Priory. Mrs Courtenay seldom noticed anything but the changes of the weather; Jane was engrossed with her maladies; and Charlotte only thought that Edith, as usual, made herself disagreeable, and was not surprised that Laura cared so little for her society.

CHAPTER XVI.

There were, however, two persons whose interest in Allingham and the Priory rendered them fully alive to the clouds which so frequently obscured the domestic sunshine — Miss Forester and Mr Dacre. The former, in pursuance of her object of becoming useful and agreeable to Laura, was peculiarly observant of the influence of others; and was not sorry to perceive the numerous indications of indifference and reserve which every day afforded, especially when it gave her an opportunity of civilly making some remark to Edith's disadvantage, and thus venting her spleen against the only person whom she considered likely to rival herself in her uncle's regard. The sources of Mr Dacre's interest were less simple. A worn-out, solitary invalid—solitary, not so much from the absence of outward friends, as from the isolation of mind attendant upon a grief too sacred to be told to any human ear, he had consented to remain at the Grange long after the period fixed for the termination of his visit, not because he was pleased with Miss Forester's flatteries, or gratified by the General's attentions, but from the powerful charm attached to the place where he had originally become acquainted with the wife he had so tenderly loved. It was at the Grange that they had first met—in its neighbourhood that they had enjoyed those opportunities of intimate acquaintance which first inspired a mutual regard, and then ripened it into love; and it was in the parish church of Elsham that they had knelt, side by side, before the altar, and in the presence of God exchanged those vows which death alone could sever.

Years passed away after that sunny time, and care, and sickness, and sorrow, and the deep yearning of the stranger's heart in a foreign land for its native home, were bitterly felt by both; but no circumstances, however untoward, could weaken an affection based upon principles of piety and mutual reverence; and when, after a union of thirty years, Mrs Dacre sank into her grave under the influence of a lingering, painful disease, the stunning effects of the trial produced an effect upon her husband's health which his constitution never afterwards recovered. Had his two children lived, Mr Dacre's sufferings would, however, have been comparatively light; for a mind like his could not long permit sorrow to interfere with the duties of life, and the necessity of exerting himself for their sake would probably in time have diverted his thoughts from the one all-engrossing remembrance. But they also were taken from him. Within a few months of each other they were laid by their mother's side; and their father, his health completely shattered by this fresh blow, was compelled to return to England, as the last hope of preserving an existence which, at the first moment of his loss, seemed scarcely of consequence to any human being. But the sorrow of the Christian, though often great, can never be without alleviations; and Mr Dacre's heart had been too well practised in submission when all was prosperous around him, to sink under the burden of affliction. As his constitution became partially re-established by his native air, his energy of mind was again roused. The world had lost its charm, but it had not lost its duties: and projects of usefulness continually suggested themselves, to the accomplishment of which his uncertain health appeared the only obstacle. Day after day, and week after week, glided on, and still his plans were unsettled; but in that time his original attachment to the

Grange and its neighbourhood had strengthened into a deeper home feeling; the result partly of habit, and partly of the interest excited by his acquaintance with Edward Courtenay. Edith, indeed, was the first to attract his regard, from a fancied resemblance to the daughter he had lost, and the charm of a simple, earnest, intelligent mind, bent upon the fulfilment of duty, at whatever sacrifice of personal enjoyment; but Edward's character, though in many respects strongly resembling his sister's, was as yet so imperfectly formed as to awaken a sympathy deeper, but far more painful, which the circumstances of their previous acquaintance tended considerably to increase. They had met at a lawyer's office in London, a short time before Edward's marriage, when Mr Dacre was endeavouring to arrange some business for a mutual friend; and, in the course of their transactions, the condition of the Allingham estate was, from necessity, made known to him, to a much greater extent than Edward desired. The information was not then of any importance, and would probably soon have been forgotten, but for his visit at the Grange, and the opinions expressed every day as to the value of Mr Courtenay's property, and the style in which he was expected to live. Even then, until he had gained a more intimate knowledge of Edward's disposition, he had thought but little upon the subject, considering the common belief merely the gossip of a country place; but the observation of a few months made him fear the power of general opinion over an enthusiastic, unstable mind.

Edward was not accused of extravagance; he indulged in no follies, and gave way to no expensive habits; but he followed the customs of society, and complied with all that was considered requisite for his position; and when that position was a false one, the consequences were not difficult to foresee. The

world said that Mr Courtenay's establishment ought to be on a certain scale; Mr Courtenay himself knew that it was larger than his actual income would allow; but it was expected of him,—it would appear strange to live without it—economy might be practised in less obvious points; and the butler, and coachman, and footmen, and grooms, lounged over their nominal duties, and injured themselves by idleness, and their master by waste, because it was necessary to keep up appearances. The world said that of course Mr Courtenay would not part with the splendid hunters, the pride of the Colonel's heart; if he did not use them himself, there would be always some persons to appreciate them; and Edward, though caring nothing for field sports, and even entertaining some doubts as to their being entirely allowable, kept hunters for his visitors, and grooms for his hunters, simply because he would not acknowledge that he could not afford it. The same principle ran through every thing—dinners, equipages, furniture, entertainments, all were upon a like scale; and daily and hourly the secret burden of anxiety pressed more heavily upon Edward's heart. But its existence was scarcely acknowledged by himself, and perceived only by Mr Dacre. Similarity of taste, and, in a great measure, of principle, had quickly softened the recollection of their previous interview; and after the bridal visit Mr Dacre was a frequent and welcome guest at Allingham: yet his desire of being really Edward's friend was not completely gratified. Friendship necessarily implies confidence, and while Edward was acting a part, even though he persuaded himself it was a justifiable one, confidence was impossible. The subject too was one of so delicate and personal a nature as to forbid all interference, except from relations or long-tried friends; and Mr Dacre's only hope rested upon Edith. Laura, it was evident, either did

not know the state of her husband's affairs, or, if she did know, shared in his thoughtlessness; but a few expressions dropped in the course of conversation with Edith led Mr Dacre to imagine that she, like himself, was acquainted with her brother's difficulties, and alive to his yielding character, and the effects it must in time produce. Here again, however, he was disappointed. From causes not confessed, but easily to be conjectured by a mind of any penetration, a reserve had sprung up between Edith and Edward, which effectually excluded every hope of influence on her part; and Mr Dacre was forced to observe silently and thoughtfully the plan of life pursued at Allingham, with the certainty that it must at last end in suffering, but without the power of interposing a warning voice against it. Yet this very sense of inability served perhaps to increase his interest. It is with a kind of painful fascination that a good mind notices the dawning of sorrow upon the young and inexperienced. There is the wish to save, and the consciousness of the vanity of human efforts; the affection that would prompt the breaking down of the barriers of custom, and the fear lest a hasty action, or an ill-timed word, may defeat the purest intentions. To speak or to be silent seems equally dangerous: and the spirit thus endowed with the fatal gift of prophecy can but watch anxiously, and pray earnestly, and strive to learn the lesson of patient trust, which God would teach us all from the miseries we see, but may not relieve.

So at least felt Mr Dacre, and his wish to remain at Elsham became every day more fixed. The world was before him, and in his youth he would have delighted in travelling; but even if his health had permitted it, the knowledge that there was no one now to share his pleasure would have effectually destroyed the inclination. He had no near relations,

—none who from being friendless and unprovided for claimed his attention. Elsham had been his home for the happiest period of his life, and no other place seemed so likely to soothe him in his present loneliness. Miss Forester and her father indeed were not congenial, but in his own house there would be no necessity for their constant society; while the footing of intimacy on which he was placed, both at Allingham and the Priory, afforded him resources in his solitary hours which he could not be equally certain of finding in any other situation, and might, if he remained in the neighbourhood, offer some occasion of guarding Edward against the danger he was incurring.

So many considerations were not long in producing results. As the Elsham world had long ago decided must be the case, Mr Dacre determined upon taking a house; but wonder and disappointment were in no small degree excited when his intended residence was made known. The village doctor overlooked his numerous engagements as he discussed the motives that could induce a man of Mr Dacre's wealth to be content with so humble a dwelling. The lawyer rested his pen upon his desk, and philosophised upon the falsity of common report, and the certainty that Indian fortunes were always exaggerated. The coachmen and grooms of the different establishments pronounced that Mr Dacre could be no gentleman: a rich gentleman with only one riding horse was a thing never heard of. The elderly ladies assembled round the whist-table forgot to mark tricks and count honours while comparing notes in loud whispers upon the fact of their new neighbour being a shocking miser: and the ladies' maids received but a gentle reprimand, although guilty of misplacing a ringlet, or producing a wrong dress, from the eagerness with which they repeated to their young mistresses the

innumerable stories of the nabob's oddities. And during this time the object of so much interest, the observed of all observers, with calm indifference pursued his own path—settled himself in his cottage—furnished his little library with books—cared studiously for the comfort of the friends who might visit him—and showed himself fully sensible of the charms of order and even of elegance, when it was to be enjoyed with others; but made no preparations for personal gratification beyond those which age and infirmity imperatively required. And why? Why, when the drawing-room and library were so stored with all that might minister to ease and innocent amusement, was Mr Dacre's private study so simple, even homely, in its appearance? Why were there no damask couches, no soft-cushioned chairs, none of the apparatus of luxury which are considered the necessary appendages of wealth? Why, when the only spare room the little cottage afforded was a model of refinement, was the chamber of its owner so perfectly unadorned? It was a question only to be answered by those who could have watched the secret principle of Mr Dacre's life,—who could have seen him in his hours of devotion, in his moments of suffering and trial, and heard the warning voice for ever sounding in his ears—"How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of heaven!" From the period when prosperity first assailed him with its temptations, this difficulty was never absent from his mind. He noticed the progress of others from toil to ease; from ease to luxury; from luxury to selfishness and forgetfulness; and his knowledge of the human heart told him that such might too probably be his own course. The gradations were so gradual as not to be perceptible; the excuses so plausible as scarcely to be withstood. Society and friends; the noble and the mean; the prince and the

beggar, alike have claims upon the expenditure of the rich man. To cut ourselves off from every thing that may be deemed a superfluity, and rigorously to insist upon " giving to nature no more than nature needs," seems a disregard of the intentions of Providence, and a faithless fear lest evil should lurk under every occasion of enjoyment. Mr Dacre saw and felt this. He did not shut his eyes to the requirements of society and his family; but without any obtrusive singularity, he nevertheless persisted in the practice of strict self-denial, for the very reason which would have induced others to give way to self-indulgence. Because his means of gratification were ample, he guarded against yielding to his own inclinations; and while his house, and his table, and his equipage, were in accordance with his station in the world, he himself, even in India—the land of indolence and ease, pursued in secret a course of life which by many would have been considered one of severe mortification. The apparent inconsistency might have surprised yet wiser persons than the gossips and newsmongers of Elsham; especially when it was known that Mr Dacre's charities, although extensive, were not such as obviously to demand any unusual economy. He subscribed freely to the schools, gave largely at the offertory, and was foremost in providing for the necessities of the poor, but he by no means relieved his neighbours from the obligation of contributing their share also. With benevolence which, after a short experience, no one could doubt, he still kept within such limits, that none could plead the munificence of the rich Indian as an excuse for their own selfishness. That there must be a considerable surplus, even after every possible expense had been taken into calculation, was decided; and how was it appropriated? Was it stored up for his heir-at-law —a distant cousin,—himself the owner of a consi-

derable estate? It was possible, but not probable; and the idea, when suggested at a tea-party in Elsham, was almost immediately rejected. Was it to be an inheritance for Miss Forester? The notion was plausible, but the lady in question was not sufficiently a favourite in society for it to be generally received. All felt it was the last way in which they should dispose of their own money, and the natural supposition was, that Mr Dacre shared the same feeling. Some said he intended to found an hospital; others, that he was wishing to endow almshouses; a few declared that plans were preparing for a new church; and one or two, incapable of attributing liberality to their neighbours from being totally devoid of it themselves, hinted that the first idea was the true one, and that, with all his show of generosity, Mr Dacre's disposition was miserly. Time and observation threw no light upon the subject; at the end of six months, the Elsham world was still in a state of uncertainty as to the private affairs of their wealthy acquaintance, and after many discussions, finally arrived at the conclusion that he could not be as rich as had been reported. This, however, was a mistake. Mr Dacre's fortune was large, and the claims upon it, according to the usual standard of benevolence, were small; but the measure of the world's charity is very different from that of the Christian's; and while India, with its enormous heathen population, its fearful ignorance, and scantily endowed Church, stood before him as the land from whence his property was derived, there could be no limit to the demand upon his resources. English blindness and wickedness might be great; and the destitute state of the Church a never-failing source of regret; but Providence points out to all who wish to be so guided, the true objects for their grateful offerings; and even in those cases in which we are apparently

most at liberty to follow our own will, a heart earnestly bent upon obedience will rather seek to discover the path indicated by circumstances, than to chalk out a line of action merely in accordance with inclination. India had been the source of Mr Dacre's wealth; and to India he desired it should return.

The great interest excited even by a rich widower in a country neighbourhood, cannot, however, continue undiminished. Mr Dacre's affairs were, at length, only occasionally canvassed, when some fresh eccentricity, as it was deemed, or some remarkable munificence, again attracted observation. His health, too, though a constant source of suffering to himself, did not as yet appear likely entirely to fail, and speculations as to the ultimate disposal of his fortune were forgotten in admiration of his winter charities, and his splendid presents to General Forester and his niece. Yet, in the monotony of every-day life, his vicinity was felt to be a considerable relief. There was always something to be told about him,—which road he had chosen for his walk, what visits he had paid, how he was looking, whether he wore a great coat—or some wonder to be expressed as to why he had not thought proper to walk at all; and in the absence of cultivation of mind, or business of consequence, these topics formed the staple source of conversation with the unoccupied better class of Elsham; varied only by similar remarks upon their other neighbours, and especially by minute criticisms upon the dress, manners, and conduct of the beautiful Mrs Courtenay of Allingham.

Laura, in the meantime, unsuspicious of evil, and seeing no indications of any necessity for prudence, felt no scruple in urging upon her husband the gratification of each wish as it arose. Expensive ornaments, new carriages, costly furniture,—all were successively thought of; when thought of, desired:

and when desired, considered indispensable: and Edward, driving from his mind every idea but that of giving her pleasure, persuaded himself that each separate expense was so trifling as to be of no consequence, and though often distrustful of his own conduct in secret, still laughed and talked, rode over his farms, inspected his improvements, and formed plans of benevolence far beyond his means, as energetically as if no causes of uneasiness lay beneath his outward prosperity. Edith looked on in sorrow; but her influence with her brother was gone. He was guided (though unknown to himself) solely by his wife; and she, in equal unconsciousness, was yielding day by day more completely to the soothing power of Miss Forester's flatteries; and was soon persuaded by her that, as the wife of Mr Courtenay of Allingham, it was absolutely requisite she should be surrounded with every luxury which selfishness and indolence could devise. And to the outward eye there was no change for many months; but there is One who "seeth not as man seeth," and before whom each day, as it passes, registers the growth either for good or evil of the inner man; and if Edward Courtenay had compared the state of his mind half a year after his marriage, with that which he had believed it to be when he made his offer to Laura, he must have been aware of his own religious declension; but the variations from week to week were as unnoticed as from hour to hour, and even the symptoms which might naturally have awakened distrust were disregarded. Perhaps, among the chief of these, was the constant recurrence of one small wish,—the same which he had once endeavoured to check in his wife. Each morning, as Laura seated herself in the drawing-room, Edward recollected the pleasure he had felt in preparing the morning room, and sighed over her disappointment. Sometimes

he accused Laura of fastidiousness, and sometimes quarrelled with old Martha for pertinacity; and the cottage at length became an eye-sore to him, and he would go considerably out of his way to avoid it, unless, as was frequently the case, he visited it under pretence of kindness, but with the real though secret intention of making another effort to gain his point.

His frequent allusions to the possibility of a change did not fail to excite old Martha's suspicions. She complained to Edith; but, believing it impossible that Edward could ever think of breaking his word, and not daring to approach the subject with him, Edith tried to persuade her that she was fanciful. The impression, however, on the old woman's mind, weakened as she was by age, was too strong to be overcome; and it was not without foundation. Edward did at length firmly resolve to effect his purpose; he determined to gratify both himself and Laura by insisting upon Martha's agreeing to his wishes, in return for the many kindnesses she had so long been in the habit of receiving. He even fixed upon the cottage to which she was to remove, and planned the particular steps which it would be necessary to take; but the opportunity for effecting his object was never afforded him. Some unguarded expressions used by him so worked upon the poor old woman's enfeebled mind, and so increased her dread of being forced into compliance, that her strength and spirits gave way; and when Edward went to her with the intention of acting upon his selfish resolution, he found her incapable of listening to him. The cause of her illness he did not suspect; and without noticing the secret feeling of satisfaction which arose in his mind, he believed, as he gave orders for everything to be provided for her comfort, that he was obeying the dictates of a benevolent heart.

Apparently he was unpunished for his conduct, and so was Laura; but the consequences of our sins are not the less certain, because they are long delayed, and in the blindness of our reason we cannot discover the connexion between causes and effects. If Edward had strenuously resisted this temptation from the first moment when it assailed him,—if he had never given Laura reason to suppose that he would yield to her wishes, even against his own knowledge of right, the breach between himself and Edith, the source of so much unhappiness, and such future trials, might never have taken place; his moral principle would have been strengthened, and his conscience have become more sensitive to the approach of evil in any other shape. But his resistance had been only in words. Immediately after cautioning Laura against wishes, he had acted against his own convictions, and so he had continued; not, as in other instances, from impulse and weakness, but wilfully; and the injury to his moral character could only be estimated by future trials. It is a fearful mistake to believe, that because our wishes are not accomplished they can do no harm.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Is Edward at home, Laura?" asked Edith, as she walked into the drawing-room at Allingham, one morning, soon after breakfast.

"At home? Yes, he is, but he is engaged: do you want to see him particularly?"

"He told me to let him know when any thing was settled about a girl to wait upon old Martha; and Mr Dacre has been proposing a niece of his housekeeper's. He is coming here himself presently: I left him in the road talking to General Forester."

"I don't think Edward can attend to you very well, just now," said Laura. "He is busy making a plan for taking in the conservatory."

Edith appeared distressed, though not surprised. She seldom came to Allingham without finding some alterations either proposed or commenced; and before she could reply, Edward entered the room.

"Will this do, Laura?" he said, after he had spoken a few words to his sister; "it looks pretty well on paper, I think."

"Oh! beautiful," exclaimed Laura; "and you will begin about it at once."

"I don't know as to that; one must consider expense a little."

"For such a trifle? why, it will not cost fifty pounds."

"Nearer a hundred."

"Or two," said Edith, gravely; the next minute repenting of having interfered.—"Can you attend to me, Edward?"

"Wait one minute. You see, Laura, it will be

very well if we can manage about the wall; but it won't do to endanger any other part of the house; so I should like to have a mason's opinion."

There was a ring at the bell, and Mr Dacre was announced. Edward was going to put his drawing aside, but Laura took it.

"I must have Mr Dacre's opinion," she said, as she advanced to shake hands. "Won't this be an immense improvement to our room? We are thinking of opening it into the conservatory."

"Extremely pretty, indeed," said Mr Dacre; "not quite equal to this though;" and he pointed to a splendid design for Torrington church, which lay on the table.

"Oh! that," replied Edward, hesitatingly—"it is only a plan: to realise it would require thousands; therefore it can be but a matter of amusement."

"Even in that way it must be a great pleasure," said Mr Dacre; "but I doubt if it would be quite satisfactory."

"Why not?"

"Merely because it is an amusement, and unreal."

"I don't see how it can be otherwise, when it is so much beyond my means."

"The thing one feels in these cases," said Mr Dacre, "is a distrust of oneself; at least I know I used to have it as a young man."

"Were you given to day-dreams then?" said Edward.

"Yes, constantly; and I can remember now the pleasure of putting by the first five pounds towards the fifteen hundred which I once wanted."

"Oh! Mr Dacre," exclaimed Laura, laughing; "I see you are an enemy in disguise. If I let Edward talk to you much longer, I may say good-bye to the conservatory."

"It is more a case of feeling than any thing else,"

said Edward; "I should not suppose myself at all nearer my object because I had advanced a snail's step towards it."

"Very likely," replied Mr Dacre, in an indifferent tone: "but sometimes one is glad of an earnest of one's own sincerity;" and turning from the subject, he began talking about old Martha. A few arrangements were to be made for the girl who was to live with her; and Edward entered into the most minute details, though Mr Dacre seemed to think it more a lady's province, and proposed that it should be left to Edith to settle. He did not know that Edward's present consideration was a salve to his conscience. Edith listened, but finding that she was not of much use, soon proposed going; and was just wishing Laura good-bye, when Mr Dacre stopped her. There was something pointed in the way in which he asked her to wait, and allow him to walk home with her; and she fancied, as she had done once or twice before in the course of the conversation, that he looked restless and disturbed, which for him was very unusual, and after a little more conversation he took his leave. Whatever his motive might have been for desiring Edith's society, he did not seem inclined to take advantage of it; and neither of them spoke till they had walked some little way. Edith was meditating upon the conversation, and at length uttering her thoughts aloud, said,—

"I can scarcely imagine my brother understood all you implied just now."

"Perhaps I did not express myself clearly. It is such an awkward thing to give opinions which appear like advice."

"You seemed afraid to press yours at least," said Edith; "but I am sure they were right."

"So I am, as a general rule; but one does so much harm by being dogmatical, especially when it

is not one's business. And after all, your brother may not have the same reasons to fear being visionary that I had when I was at his age."

"That is not likely," said Edith; "no day-dreams can surpass his, I am sure; and he has no one to warn him against them."

Mr Dacre thought for a few moments, and then said, rather abruptly, "Do you remember our conversation the first day we met in the Park, last autumn?"

"Yes," replied Edith; "it interested me too much to be easily forgotten."

"We spoke of influence, I think," continued Mr Dacre: "it is a subject often in my mind."

"I have no influence with Edward," said Edith, "if that is what you would imply. Do you think I have?"

"If I answer your question," he replied, "I am afraid I shall be forced to obtrude some more opinions."

"Not obtrude," replied Edith, "if you mean they would not be acceptable."

"Will you then give me an old man's privilege, and forgive me if I say that you ought to have an influence, though it is not always evident that you have?"

"It never can be," said Edith. "Who could rival Laura?"

"Who would wish it? But I was wrong in saying that you had no influence, since no human being is without it. The difficulty is, to make the best use of it."

"Mine is so slight now," said Edith, "it can be of no importance."

"You hold a common opinion," said Mr Dacre: "but have you ever considered what we should feel if we were suddenly made to see the effect of every

careless word and action? I think we should scarcely say then that we had no influence."

"It is a frightful thought," said Edith. "I don't think I could always bear it."

"No," replied Mr Dacre: "our eyes are blinded in mercy; but it is well sometimes to realise the truth, though only for an instant. All that we have once said or done may fade from the memory, but it does not therefore die."

A bitter recollection flashed upon Edith's mind, and she felt as if it would be impossible to speak.

"You must forgive me," continued Mr Dacre; "I was accustomed to talk upon these subjects once with my own child, and the habit is renewed unconsciously."

"Oh!" exclaimed Edith, "if you would only look upon me in the same light, and tell me all you think I ought to do, I might be saved from many trials. I do wish,—yes, most earnestly wish to do right."

"No one who is acquainted with you could for a moment doubt it," said Mr Dacre, in a tone of deep interest. "Unfortunately, I am so circumstanced as to deal only in generalities, and they are most frequently useless. I cannot tell you how you may influence your brother, but I know that a great power has been placed in your hands, as it has been in the hands of every human being, and that we shall have to render a most strict account for it: and I own I am very anxious to impress this truth upon you."

"And why?" asked Edith.

Mr Dacre paused. "Are you satisfied," he said, "that your brother's life is likely to be a happy one?"

"I don't know," said Edith, hastily; surprised at the question; "do you ask me because you are afraid for him?"

"If I were a member of your family ——" began Mr Dacre.

"But why should you not consider yourself such?" said Edith; "I am sure we are not common friends."

"No, I hope not. But I may be mistaken; and many persons would think me ridiculous in fancying that your brother is not quite alive to the expenses of his splendid establishment."

Edith was silent from astonishment; the remark implied a knowledge of Edward's affairs which she could not account for.

"Pray don't think me impertinent," continued Mr Dacre; "indeed I have reasons for what I say."

"I should scarcely have imagined," replied Edith, "that Edward's style of living would be thought beyond what six thousand a year permits."

Mr Dacre felt puzzled; he had ventured as far as he dared, and began to think, that, after all, his conjectures must be wrong, and that Edith knew no more of her brother's affairs than the rest of the world.

"A clear income of six thousand a year might possibly cover all expenses," he said, pointedly.

Edith paused suddenly in her walk. "A clear income!" she repeated, as she anxiously watched the expression of Mr Dacre's face. "Then do you know?—has Edward told ——"

"He has not told me any thing, my dear Miss Courtenay; but our acquaintance did not commence at Allingham. We met once, previously to his marriage, at a lawyer's office in London."

"And it was there you learnt all!" exclaimed Edith. "Do you know how deeply ——"

"I know but few particulars," said Mr Dacre, interrupting her; "but I certainly understood enough to convince me that the most prudent economy was required,—and to make me feel frightened this morning, when General Forester told me he was going to propose to your brother to stand for the county at the expected dissolution of Parliament."

Poor Edith looked aghast at this announcement.

"I don't wish to alarm you," he said. "Very probably your brother may not even have the wish to be in Parliament."

"But he has, I know," exclaimed Edith: "and Laura will urge it; and Edward is so blinded by his affection for her, he will do any thing to please her."

"Then, perhaps," said Mr Dacre, "she is the most important person to influence. Of course, she knows more of Mr Courtenay's affairs than any one."

"I think not," said Edith, trying to overcome her agitation. "It may sound strange, but I am nearly certain she is as ignorant as every one else. Edward never told any one but me, and then it was with an implied promise that I was never to mention the subject."

"It is very unfortunate," said Mr Dacre, thoughtfully; "but at all events you can do something, and you are the only person. As to myself, I have taken now a step which many would consider an intolerable liberty."

"Their feelings would be very different from mine," said Edith; and her sweet smile brought a fond remembrance to Mr Dacre's heart: "but you don't know Laura. We are so unlike in taste and disposition; and besides—" She stopped, remembering that there were other causes why her sister-in-law was not likely to be guided by any thing she might say.

"There must be some points on which you may meet, surely," replied Mr Dacre.

"None!" exclaimed Edith, despairingly. "Edward must take his own course, for I have no power to stop him."

"Yet he is your brother."

"Yes, but natural ties are slight when circumstances combine to separate them."

"Are they indeed slight?" said Mr Dacre, very gravely. "They are formed by God, and what He has joined together, who may dare to put asunder?"

Edith looked bewildered and miserable. "You talk to me," she said, "as if all were in my power—as if Edward's safety or ruin depended upon my actions; and you may be right,—but if I were to dwell upon the thought, I should be incapable of doing any thing. Who will venture to walk in darkness, when one false step may do such incalculable mischief?"

"May I answer you in very solemn words?" replied Mr Dacre. "You must remember where it is said, 'Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light; let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.' And is not life all darkness?"

"It is so now to me," said Edith, with less of calmness than usual.

"It is so to us all; but perhaps you may have sometimes watched a lamp let down into one of those deep wells which centuries ago were cut out of the solid rock, and seen how, as it went down, it threw a clear light immediately around, though above and below all was dark as before. Did it ever strike you as a type of the principle of faith, which gives us just sufficient comfort for our hour of need, though the past and the future may still remain mysteries?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Edith, "if I could only have some one with me always, to whom I could talk freely! but no person can enter into the difficulties of a family, except those who live with them; and if we are doing wrong, we can have no right to trust to the lamp of faith."

"And have you really no one to sympathise with

you?" said Mr Dacre. "You will not think the question a curious one?"

"If Gertrude were at home," said Edith, "every thing would be well. She understands so much better than I do what ought to be done, and she would never give offence."

"I thought you knew but little of her. She is seldom at the Priory, I believe."

"Yes," replied Edith; "but her letters, and the interest she takes in every thing, make us feel as if she lived amongst us. Perhaps, though, she could not help me now, for she has never been made acquainted with Edward's affairs; and all my feelings about his marriage, were so mixed up with anxiety upon this one subject, that I have scarcely ventured to allude to them, lest I should say something which might seem like a betrayal of his confidence. She thinks me reserved, I know; and I can never tell her,—I feel I must be left alone."

"Yet I must again entreat you to do your utmost," said Mr Dacre, "if you should find your brother at all inclined to listen to General Forester. It may be a great temptation, and the consequences may be of such infinite importance to him."

Edith sighed deeply: "I don't think there is any cause to be afraid really," she said, "because the danger is so evident. A man cannot deceive himself about elections; every one knows they are ruinous, unless there is a large fortune to support them; but the notion frightened me very much at first."

Mr Dacre's silence showed that he was less sanguine as to the power of Edward's common sense: but he had said all that he considered necessary, and he felt that he was not called on to interfere farther. They parted at the gate leading to old Martha's cottage. A tear glistened in Edith's eye, and her voice trembled, as she bade Mr Dacre good-bye.

The shadow of a coming sorrow was passing over her mind, and Mr Dacre saw and felt it;—felt it the more, that he had been himself in some degree its cause.

"You will think of me as a friend who longs to be of service to you," he said, as he warmly pressed her hand: "and may I also remind you, that if I am powerless, there is One who can guard you and all you love from harm."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Jane, my dear Jane, are you both going out this morning? My knitting is so tangled, I shall never put it right again;" and Mrs Courtenay's voice was rather more elevated than usual, and not entirely free from querulousness.

"Edith will be at home presently," replied Jane, who was standing in the doorway, prepared for a morning visit, and not at all inclined to delay the gratification of exhibiting the new bonnet and scarf which had arrived from town only the previous evening.

"Just look, my dear," continued her mother; "here are three stiches let down; and my eyes are so bad I shall never take them up properly."

Jane advanced slowly into the room, and carelessly surveying the work, declared it to be in such a state that it was better to begin it entirely afresh; and as she knew very little of knitting, it would be foolish to undertake the task herself; and besides, they should be late for their visit, if they did not set off at once. "Don't you agree with me, Charlotte?" she exclaimed, as her sister entered.

"Oh! of course. I don't know at all what you are talking of; only I guess it is something about staying at home."

"It was about my knitting," said Mrs Courtenay: "Jane tells me it must be begun again. I wish Gertrude, dear child, had thought upon something easier; but then she did not know how you were all occupied."

"I suspect Gertrude knows very little of any

thing that any one else knows," exclaimed Charlotte; "she and Edith will do admirably to go through life together. My dear mamma, I quite agree with Jane, you had much better wait till Edith comes."

"So provoking it is of Edith," said Jane, pettishly; "she is always out of the way. This is the fourth day we have seen nothing of her from breakfast to dinner."

"She is gone to see old Martha to-day, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "so you must not complain of her."

"I don't complain," replied Charlotte; "the business would be hopeless if one once began it. All I wish is, that we lived in a mud cottage, and went about without shoes and stockings, and then we might hope to have a little of Edith's attention."

Mrs Courtenay raised her eyes from her work, and looked at her daughter in vacant astonishment. "No shoes and stockings, my dear,—how very dreadful! Pray don't say so before Edward."

"I would say so before the whole world," said Charlotte, laughing: "I don't mean to be hard upon Edith, but I must say she neglects home duties. Come, Jane, we have no time to spare."

Jane quickly obeyed the summons; and Charlotte, having given her opinion upon Edith's faults, went for her walk with a contented conscience.

For the next quarter of an hour Mrs Courtenay meditated in silence and solitude upon the three delinquent stitches; and then, finding the occupation slightly wearisome, walked to the window, sighed and yawned, and at last crept up stairs, to search in the right-hand corner of her oaken cabinet for a piece of silk to make a bag; the use of which was not yet decided upon, only bags were always useful. The sound of Edith's voice disturbed her, while yet undecided between the different claims of brown and purple; and with natural kindness of heart she has-

tened to inquire for old Martha. Edith was looking tired, harassed, and ill. She had unexpectedly again met with her brother on her way home, and while Mr Dacre's words yet weighed heavily upon her mind; and the conversation which had taken place between them, instead of affording any opening for attempting to warn him against his danger, had been short and unsatisfactory. Edward's thoughts were full of the splendid drawing-room which was to open upon the conservatory, and he paid but little attention to the few observations made by his sister; and Edith mused sadly upon the days that were gone by, and upon the barrier which a slight want of consideration, and a few hasty words, had raised between them. She longed to speak as she might once have done, freely and openly—to tell him of her fears—to entreat him to be on his guard; but it seemed impossible. At the period when their confidence was unbroken, the task would have been difficult; and with their present estrangement, she scarcely dared hope that he would listen to her, even if she had summoned up resolution to introduce the subject. Perhaps, if she had known all the weakness of Edward's heart, she might have been more inclined to excuse herself; but the only remark he made which at all interested her, showed thought and kindness for poor Martha; and Edith blamed herself more than usual for having ever said anything to vex him. They were together but a few minutes, for Edward pleaded Laura's solitude as an excuse for returning to the Park, and Edith assented directly; and without any expression of regard beyond a careless shake of the hand, allowed him to depart. And yet, at that moment, she would have given up all that was most valuable upon earth—time, and comfort, and health, and affluence, and scarcely reckoned it a sacrifice—to save him from suffering.

With so much to depress her, the recollection of the absence of sympathy in her home was more painful than ever, and she felt relieved on hearing that her sisters were gone out; but Mrs Courtenay met her in the hall, and assailed her with a host of rapid, unimportant questions, to which, notwithstanding some newly-formed resolutions of respect, Edith found it difficult to reply with temper. There was, however, no escaping from them; and too weary to bear the exertion of standing, she proposed adjourning to the drawing-room, and was just entering, when the appearance of Miss Forester, stationed by the table, with a book in her hand, caused both herself and her mother to draw back in surprise.

"I am afraid I startled you, my dear Mrs Courtenay. The servant went to let you know I was here, and in the meantime I have been amusing myself with some of your enticing books. Is this interesting, Miss Courtenay?" and Miss Forester held out a volume of Jane's usual studies.

"Really I don't know, I never read novels."

"Indeed! but I was foolish to ask the question. I confess myself a mere ordinary mortal, so I am not ashamed of doing what every one else does. But you will have very little time for reading for several months to come; canvassing votes will be a sufficient occupation for all Mr Courtenay's family, since parliament is to be dissolved immediately."

Edith's countenance betrayed her uneasiness. Although professing in her own mind never to believe more than one-half, at least, of any news brought by Miss Forester, yet this decided assertion made her almost fancy that everything was settled.

"I am not surprised at your astonishment," continued Miss Forester; "it has astonished every one; but there was a long debate the night before last—ministers were beaten, and the consequence is a

resignation, and, of course, a dissolution; so now I must congratulate you. My father says Mr Courtenay is certain of success."

Mrs Courtenay was breathless from astonishment. Her eyes opened to their fullest extent, and unable to speak, she turned to Edith for an explanation.

"This is the first intelligence my mother has received," said Edith, recovering herself completely, and speaking in the calm, dignified tone with which she generally succeeded in checking Miss Forester's friendly impertinence; "I heard the report of the dissolution from Mr Dacre just now."

Miss Forester looked angry, as she always did when Edith mentioned her uncle's name. "Indeed! I should have imagined him less communicative. The news has only just arrived. It was brought privately to my father, and he set off for Allingham instantly."

"Then the congratulations are rather premature."

"Oh, no! there is not the slightest doubt of Mr Courtenay's being returned. The feeling of the whole county is in his favour. My father questions even whether Mr Vivian will oppose him."

"But you seem to have forgotten the principal point," said Edith: "my brother must first consent to stand."

"You do not mean to say he would refuse? But, no, I see you are only joking; no one could hesitate with such a prospect before him."

"What is it, my dear?" said Mrs Courtenay, laying her hand on Edith's arm.—"My dear Miss Forester, what is it? what are they going to do with Edward?"

"Nothing, I hope," said Edith.

"Make him a member of Parliament," replied Miss Forester.

"Well! yes, certainly," said Mrs Courtenay;

"that will be quite right. The Allingham family always were members till the poor Colonel died; and then, you know, the little boy was too young."

"There is very little use in thinking upon the subject," said Edith, coldly, "where the only foundation for the idea is report."

"There I shall beg to differ from you. All that I say comes from the very highest authority;—and here are your sisters: I must see if they are equally unbelieving."

"Unbelieving about what?" exclaimed Charlotte, as she shook hands; "my creed is unbelief; so I can give you but little hope."

"I merely wish you to believe in the fact, that parliament is about to be dissolved immediately, and that, as a necessary consequence, your brother will be member for the county in the room of Mr Vivian."

"The first proposition admits of no doubt, since you are the person to vouch for it; the second —— what do you say, Edith?"

"Your sister denies the possibility entirely," said Miss Forester, "though she has not informed me upon what grounds. But you do not seem at all surprised: had you heard the news before?"

"A rumour as to the resignation of ministers reached us when we were paying our last visit, but I did not give any particular attention to it: nothing was said about Edward."

"But don't you agree with me?"

"Certainly, as to the fact that he will stand: it is just the foolish thing he would do. Success is another question."

"Why should you say he will do it, if it is foolish, Charlotte?" said Edith, still unable to endure patiently any implication upon Edward's stability of character.

"Your sister is as strong a champion for her brother as ever, I see," observed Miss Forester to Charlotte,

with a soft bitterness of voice, peculiarly her own. "I should have supposed that six months of matrimony—eight months, indeed—Mr Courtenay, I believe, was married in October—might have had some effect upon her zeal."

Edith took no notice of the observation, though her heightened colour showed that it was understood.

"Our curiosity will soon be set at rest," said Jane. "If Edward has resolved upon standing, he will give us the earliest intelligence."

"Or rather Laura will," said Charlotte. "In fact, my own opinion is, that if we wish to know Edward's determination, the most certain mode will be to ascertain hers."

"Are you not a little severe?" said Miss Forester.

"Why should you think so? Laura merely exercises a wife's rightful influence."

"All married women rule," said Jane; "only some have more tact than others in hiding it. A perfect stranger could discover it at Allingham."

Edith longed to change the conversation, feeling that such a discussion of family affairs before a common acquaintance was not merely a breach of good taste, but implied a degree of intimacy which she was not at all inclined to acknowledge. As usual, however, her suggestion was of no avail, from the awkward manner in which it was made.

"There is nothing to be gained by knowing who rules, or does not rule," she said, shortly. "Edward's affairs are his own, and he must be the best judge as to what most conduces to his happiness."

"Can I do or say anything for any one at Allingham?" said Miss Forester. "My time is precious, and I must go and congratulate Mrs Courtenay upon her husband's prospects."

"And urge her not to allow him to neglect them," said Charlotte.

"Yes, certainly, I shall make a point of doing it. As a matter of duty to my father, to further his wishes, I shall state all the advantages he foresees. Not that there can be any need of my arguments: Mr Courtenay is too sensible a person to resist the entreaties of his best friends;" and Miss Forester, aware, from Edith's manner, that she disliked the idea of Edward's being in parliament, trusted that she had inflicted some little pain.

"Well!" exclaimed Charlotte, "I can only repeat what I said before—whoever wins Laura, wins Edward."

"Then I am certain of success. Mrs Courtenay and I have often talked together upon the subject, and I know her wishes perfectly."

Edith sighed, and so deeply as to attract general observation.

"Your sister seems to take a very gloomy view of the subject," continued Miss Forester. "I am afraid her influence will be exerted in the opposite scale to mine, so I had better take the field at once. There is generally great wisdom in being beforehand. Good morning to you. I will call on my return to let you know Mrs Courtenay's feelings."

Even Jane was roused by this freedom, and observed, sharply, that "it would be an unnecessary trouble, for they should probably have heard everything long before;" but Edith, conscious of the power which Miss Forester exercised over Laura's mind, and with a vivid remembrance of Mr Dacre's warnings, sprang forward to stop her as she was about to leave the room.

"Pray, pray,——" she began, and then paused.

Miss Forester gazed upon her with the same unpleasant smile she usually wore.

"Let me beg——" Edith again commenced, and Miss Forester was still silent.

" Don't keep your friend in the draught, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; " no one can stand it. My last cold was caught in that way."

" What is the meaning of this nonsense?" exclaimed Charlotte. " Really, Edith, you are too ridiculous."

" I am in no hurry," said Miss Forester, keeping her sharp bright eyes fixed upon Edith, whose embarrassment was every moment increasing.

" Will you—will you ask Mr Dacre's opinion before you urge——"

For the third time the sentence remained unfinished. Edith felt that she could give no explanation of the request. Miss Forester's indignation, however, was sufficiently excited.

" There can be no occasion to apply to my uncle to learn his opinions upon any subject," she exclaimed, in a tone of proud anger, very unlike her usual affected suavity. " Your opinions, it is well known, are his; where so much is to be gained by agreement, you would not venture to differ."

" I do not understand you," said Edith, restored to self-possession by the sight of Miss Forester's irritation. " All that I meant to say was, that Mr Dacre has had great experience, and I am certain has my brother's interest at heart, and I think he would say that it is unwise for any person to attempt to influence Edward's decision."

" You are behaving in a most extraordinary manner, Edith," said Charlotte. " You seize upon Miss Forester, and begin speaking vehemently, and look most mysterious; and when the explanation comes, it is merely that you think one person will consider it unwise for another person to try to influence Edward. If you are so uneasy lest he should be induced to stand (though why you should be no one can imagine), you had better go and advise him. A sister's opinion will surely be listened to."

Edith scarcely waited for the concluding words before she had left the room, overcome by a painful sense of her own want of self-command and presence of mind, and keenly sensible of the ridicule she had incurred. Yet, as she ran up stairs, she could not avoid hearing Miss Forester's words, spoken expressly in a loud tone:

"I may tell Mrs Courtenay, then, that you are rejoicing in the idea?"

Charlotte's reply was not clear, but Miss Forester's laugh was; and, as the climax of consolation, she departed with the assurance that, even if Mrs Courtenay disapproved, there were arguments to be brought forward, which must be all-powerful with her husband.

CHAPTER XIX.

An unusual excitement prevailed at Allingham on that day, not from the number of visitors, or the preparations for an entertainment, or the tumult of unexpected grief or joy, but simply from the great, almost magical effect of a few mysterious looks and words. General Forester called, and was told that Mr Courtenay was gone out. "It was a most unfortunate event. Which way was he gone? How long was he likely to be absent? Had he said anything about his return? No message could be left, for a personal interview was absolutely necessary;" and the obsequious footman suggesting the privacy and convenience of the library, the General, after ascertaining that Laura was not in the house, remained, as he thought, unobserved for the next quarter of an hour, whilst the unemployed domestics, making various excursions in front of the window, watched him carefully perusing papers and writing notes, and went back to their companions to conjecture and decide upon what was going to happen. Then came their master's return; and a long conversation in the library with carefully closed doors, through which, however, General Forester's pompous tones were occasionally caught, as he spoke of patriotism, and self-sacrifice, and family influence, and the necessity for exertion in such troubled times. Mr Courtenay's answers were at first low and short, indicating firm decision; but the General was not easily to be repelled, and longer explanations, and greater energy, were soon brought into play. Still the exact purport of the interview was unknown; but a practised listener

would have detected a certain softening of the pleader's voice, and an earnest deprecatory emphasis in the defendant's replies, which showed that the latter had begun to place more reliance upon the sound than upon the strength of his arguments. After two hours spent in this manner, the General took his leave, with a pleased, satisfied smile upon his lips, and an expression of conscious importance in his demeanour. Edward, on the contrary, was moody and restless. He inquired for his wife, and finding that she was not returned, paced the colonnade rapidly and steadily for a considerable time, and then suddenly walked away in the direction of Mr Dacre's cottage—and here the curiosity of the Allingham establishment was baffled; but neither, if it had been possible to gain an insight into Edward's mind, would it have been easy to discover the motives of his actions. He had, in fact, no determinate motive. General Forester's proposition, when first made, had been declined, gratefully, but decidedly; then gratefully but thoughtfully; and at last gratefully and waveringly; and now, with an agitated, excited mind, Edward was about to apply to a human counsellor, disinterested indeed and high-principled, but still only human; because he could not brave alone the struggle between duty and inclination, and dared not, in the secrecy of his own chamber, ask for that guidance from God which he was conscious of being but little inclined to follow. And in this, as in many other instances, Edward acted so as completely to deceive himself. He acknowledged the all-sufficient obstacles in the path of his ambition; he believed he saw them in their strongest light; and he felt that, in applying to Mr Dacre, he was consulting a person who would not for an instant allow his judgment to be blinded by sophistry; but he did not see that, until these obstacles were removed, the opinion of a third person

could not be required; and that, in submitting the case to human judgment, he was, in fact, leaving himself free to decide according to his own will. A self-chosen authority may be self-deposed, and can never be of any avail, except in cases where the question of right and wrong is so nicely balanced as to be difficult of adjustment, or when we entirely distrust ourselves, and are willing to submit implicitly to another, whether for or against our inclinations. Edward's state of mind was the very reverse of this. Even in ordinary cases, he piqued himself upon abiding by his own decision, unconscious that weakness of resolution was his prevailing defect; and when shown into Mr Dacre's study, he entered far more like a person who has performed a noble action, and is in expectation of well-merited praise, than one who is desirous of advice under trying circumstances.

"You are come, I suppose," said Mr Dacre, "to tell me something more about your old nurse and my little protegée; I am sorry you should have so much trouble."

"That was all settled this morning with my sister," replied Edward: "my business now is rather more important. You must have heard the news before this."

"The resignation of ministers?" said Mr Dacre.

"Yes, and the consequent dissolution. The papers have not yet publicly confirmed the report, but General Forester has had private information, which puts it beyond doubt."

"And are you come so early to canvass for Mr Vivian?" said Mr Dacre, with a considerable misgiving as to the answer he should receive.

"No, no," exclaimed Edward, eagerly. "You forget that we differ entirely."

"Then for his intended opponent?"

"Wrong again;—but I am not come to canvass at all,—merely to ask advice."

Mr Dacre's countenance resumed its usual expression of grave interest.

"That is to say," continued Edward, "not advice exactly; but I should be glad to know whether our opinions agree. What—what should you think if I were to stand myself?"

The very tone of his voice was an index to his wavering mind, and Mr Dacre's ordinary self-possession was rather shaken.

"The suggestion is startling to you, I see," added Edward, who, though not in general vain, felt slightly annoyed at perceiving that his friend did not consider him the fittest of all persons to represent the county.

"It is natural to be surprised when such a notion is started for the first time," said Mr Dacre; "but you surely cannot be anxious for my advice on this point; you must know so much better than I do the reasons for or against it."

"As in most cases, there is much to be said on both sides," replied Edward. "General Forester has been with me nearly two hours this morning, setting forth in the strongest manner the reasons which should induce me to come forward."

"The General is a party man," observed Mr Dacre.

"So he may be, but our principles entirely agree. He said many things which were very striking;—and certainly these are times when to be in Parliament is to obtain a vast influence."

"Fearfully vast," said Mr Dacre.

"But you would not on that account shrink from it, I suppose?"

"Not when a clear path of duty is pointed out; but the difficulty in these cases is to decide whether it is our path or some other person's which we fancy ourselves called upon to enter."

Edward was provoked at finding that his adviser's

decision was likely to be in favour of his conscience against his inclination; and a little reflection, at this instant, might have convinced him that his judgment was not so irrevocably settled as he had imagined.

"Then you think," he said, endeavouring to conceal his pique, "that the path of a member of Parliament is not mine?"

"Before I answer," replied Mr Dacre, "I must ask you to explain your meaning rather more clearly. Do you wish to know whether I think you fitted for the office, or merely whether it appears prudent in you to stand for it?"

"Both—both: I include every thing," said Edward, hastily.

Mr Dacre was considerably embarrassed. If Edward had openly stated his difficulties, and then appealed to his judgment, the case would have been easily decided; but now it was impossible to speak conscientiously, without alluding to those pecuniary affairs which seemed, by a tacit agreement, to have been hitherto forgotten by both. "The question of personal fitness," he said, at length, "must be left to every man's conscience. I should consider any person with a clear judgment and strict unbending principles of duty justified in obtaining, if possible, a seat in Parliament, provided that his situation in life offered him the means."

"Yes,—certainly,—yes,—" said Edward, hesitatingly; "but, in fact, General Forester assures me that the expenses of the election shall cost me nothing. The gentlemen of the county, he is certain, will guarantee them."

"I would not distrust the gentlemen of this or any other county," replied Mr Dacre; "but experience is against the fact of any man's obtaining a seat in Parliament without expenses. And then the consequences—the frequent residence in town, and

the perpetual claims, and the exertions to maintain popularity."

"Ah! but I should make no exertions," exclaimed Edward. "No person can be less inclined than myself to pay court to that 'many-headed monster-thing,' the people."

"So much the worse," continued Mr Dacre, "as far as your expenses are concerned. You may pay court to the little farmer and the petty tradesman with tobacco and small beer, but your supporters in the higher ranks will require ices and champaigne."

"No, no!" exclaimed Edward, impatiently, "you do not understand my ideas. If I went into Parliament, it would be on a totally different footing. I could never lower myself by trying to conciliate any one; it would not be worth while. The seat itself is a mere nothing to me; it could neither add to nor diminish from my happiness, yet it might open a wide field of usefulness, and this is the only thing which makes me hesitate,—although," he added, in a less determined manner, "I have declined General Forester's proposals for the present; that is, I have told him he must not depend upon me."

Mr Dacre seemed disinclined to speak, and Edward continued in a loud eager tone:—"It is a most alarming responsibility, certainly, to take upon oneself—but something must be done. If men of property, and educated in good principles, do not sacrifice themselves, the country will infallibly be ruined. Just look at the manufacturing districts—the abject misery of the poor, and the enormous fortunes of the rich;—look at the statistics of crime—at the rapidly increasing population, and the misery occasioned by the New Poor Law; and then turn to the colonies—see the mass of vice which is daily accumulating in our convict settlements, with scarcely a hope of improvement, and almost destitute of a church; and

then consider for one instant the condition of that church in England—deprived of all power by the state, forbidden to assemble in convocation, and illegally robbed of the means of providing for her children. The Church!"—and Edward became still more excited and enthusiastic—"yes, if it were for the Church alone, I should long to be a member of Parliament."

"It is an awful, a most awful picture," said Mr. Dacre, in a tone of solemnity which contrasted forcibly with Edward's energy; and then, resting his forehead upon the mantelpiece, he appeared for some minutes buried in thought. "Yet," he continued, rousing himself from his reverie, "unless we are clearly pointed out by Providence as the instruments of so great a work as the salvation of our country, I think we ought to consider seriously before we undertake it."

"Then who will dare to attempt it?" replied Edward. "No one can look into his own heart, and say that he is qualified to judge correctly upon the least of those subjects upon which men are perpetually required to legislate."

"It is not an inward, but an outward call which I should deem necessary," said Mr Dacre; "not merely a man's talent and principle, but the being provided with the means of exercising them."

"Money!" exclaimed Edward, with a slight, a very slight, accent of sarcasm.

"Yes, money: you have expressed precisely what was in my mind."

"But surely—surely," continued Edward, "you cannot see any connexion between the possession of money and the making just laws."

"There is no necessary connexion, I own; but if a father, perfect in wisdom and goodness, were to place his child in sight of a battle, and, after

enjoining upon him strict obedience to whatever line of conduct he might point out, were to fetter his hands and chain his feet, I think we should say that the duty of that child was patience and submission, rather than active exertion."

"It is an imaginary case," said Edward, "and it cannot be mine. If I were to stand, General Forester assures me I should be brought in free of all expenses. I am not blind enough to take such a phrase literally, but it must mean something."

"Even then I confess I should have considerable scruples," said Mr Dacre.

"Why, why?" asked Edward, impatiently.

"Because it would be engaging in a most important business without the authority to control it. Every one knows the mischiefs of an election,—the drunkenness, and falsehood, and deceit—I will not say bribery and perjury—which are almost always its attendants."

"But you cannot imagine I should allow such things," exclaimed Edward, looking extremely hurt: "then indeed you have mistaken me."

"No, believe me; I am certain you would not; and it is for this very reason I am convinced that after consideration you could not allow yourself to be brought forward by others, instead of standing independently. If they undertake your expenses, they must manage your affairs. You will be a mere tool in their hands. Whatever they may do will have the sanction of your name, and yet you will not be able to raise a finger against it. Can you trust yourself to this?"

There was a silence of several minutes, whilst Edward communed with his own thoughts. "You are right," he said at length, turning to Mr Dacre; "I see it now even more clearly than before. It must not be; and yet, do not consider it merely the vanity

of a young man: I think I should have done my duty."

"I am sure, quite sure, that no man would ever have entered upon the office with a more firm intention of doing it; but I think you will agree with me, that when we place ourselves in any position which it is not clearly the intention of Providence we should occupy, we have great reason to doubt whether our best intentions may not fail. All situations of importance are situations of temptation likewise."

"If we could shut our eyes to the miseries of the country," replied Edward, "it would be easy to submit to a life of seclusion and inactivity; but it is impossible to look at what England is, and what she might be, and not long to exert oneself."

"And are you sure that there may not be exertions for good made in private, as powerful as any which a public man may exercise—the influence of daily example, for instance; meekness, and purity, and charity? If it is the will of God that England should be saved, is it not possible that the end may be attained by the constant prayers and efforts of good men whose names may never be heard beyond their own narrow circle?"

"But to feel that we have a power, and to be forbidden to use it," said Edward, "that is the trial. To see other people acting on false low principles, and know that our own education has been different, and therefore to hope that we should act from higher motives, and still to be patient."

"The highest of all principles," replied Mr Dacre, "is surely obedience. If we are deficient in this,—if we have a wish to escape from it,—we cannot answer for any other."

"I scarcely see the case in as strong a light as you do," answered Edward; "but I suppose it is right to distrust oneself."

"It is safest, at least," replied Mr Dacre.

"Then it is decided," said Edward; "that is to say, your opinion is merely a confirmation of my own; but I am glad to have had it."

This speech, so evidently a salve to Edward's wounded pride, would have been amusing to almost any person except Mr Dacre; but although, with his peculiarly clear insight into human nature, he detected instantly the feeling from which it arose, it only gave him a sense of insecurity and doubt as to Edward's ultimate conduct; and with this he could not be amused. Yet there were many kind words at parting; many expressions of gratitude and regard; and a stranger would have supposed that Mr Courtenay's decision was immovably settled; but Mr Dacre thought otherwise.

CHAPTER XIX.

When Miss Forester left the Priory, it was with the intention, as she had said, of calling at Allingham; but the sight of Mrs Courtenay's low phaeton and grey ponies, in the road leading to Elsham, proved that her visit would be useless; and not being able to satisfy her curiosity in the way she desired, her next step was to return home as quickly as possible, to obtain from her father all the further information he was able and willing to give. And as she walked, visions—bright, tempting visions—dreams of luxury and magnificence—of elegant dinners—and fashionable society—balls and soirées—Almacks and Buckingham Palace—filled Miss Forester's head; and the stepping stone to this grandeur was Edward Courtenay's seat in Parliament. Let this point once be gained, and every thing else was easy. As his wife's intimate friend, but little management would be required to enable her to share her pleasures; and Miss Forester, notwithstanding the five and thirty years which had passed over her head, dwelt upon the idea with the false excitement of a girl of eighteen. Laura, in the mean time, drove into Elsham; paid her visits in proper form; inquired after the health of the various households; discussed the weather, and praised the children; and then, that she might return home with a conscience completely at ease, turned her ponies' heads in the direction of the Priory. It was a duty-visit, such as she now was in the habit of making at regular intervals, and which was becoming daily more and more irksome. It was not merely that Mrs Courtenay was weak-minded, and her sisters-

in-law either thoughtless and satirical, or cold and uncongenial; but there was something in the family circle, scarcely to be told in words, but jarring even upon the least susceptible nerves, which to Laura was peculiarly distressing. Almost every sentence, and gesture, and action, betrayed the absence of harmony; and as Laura became, by observation, more alive to the distinctive traits of character, she naturally felt more painfully the little intonations of voice, and trifling marks of selfishness, which by an ordinary acquaintance, would probably have been unheeded. And then she thought of Edith's sense, and decision, and energy, and self-denial; of her kindness to the poor; her affection for Edward, blended with her forgetfulness of her home, and the unkind words and great neglect of herself; and the problem became too difficult for Laura to solve; only she felt that, if Edith were good, goodness was disagreeable.

Jane and Charlotte, with their mother, were still in the drawing-room when Laura entered, and imagining that she was come to inform them of the expected event, addressed her with questions and congratulations, so rapidly as to give her no time to inquire their meaning.

"Just think, my dear," began Mrs Courtenay, "what a change! and you will be in London so much; and poor Edward is not at all strong; we never thought he would live when he was two months old."

"Rather jumping to conclusions, without giving the premises, mamma," said Charlotte, observing her sister-in-law's bewildered expression; "but really, Laura, we do want to know what Edward says to this business."

"Yes, my dear," interrupted Mrs Courtenay; "sit down here, and tell us all about it—a little closer—you know I'm rather deaf; now then, when did he hear about it first?"

"This morning, of course," observed Jane. "Miss Forester said the General went off directly."

"Went off where? what do you mean? what are you all talking about?" exclaimed Laura.

"Oh! my love, you know," said Mrs Courtenay; "and we are so longing to hear—pray tell us quickly."

"But what? tell what?" repeated Laura; "I should be very much obliged if some one would explain."

"There is no particular explanation needed, that I can see," replied Jane; "we only want to know if Edward intends standing."

"Standing!" again repeated Laura.

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "if you would only make haste, I should be so glad; I really am nervous from being kept so long in suspense."

"And there can be no good in it," continued Jane, "for we must know sooner or later."

"Besides, I thought you disliked mysteries," said Charlotte; "and if you did not, elections are such public things, it is useless to attempt keeping them to oneself."

"Then parliament is dissolved," exclaimed Laura; starting from her seat, in an excitement of surprise and pleasure; "the very thing, of all others, I have been longing for."

"So he will stand, my dear," asked Mrs Courtenay, in a tremulous voice; and she laid her hand upon Laura's arm in order to be certain of detaining her till the question was answered.

Laura moved away; and heedless of any thing but her own gratification in the prospect suddenly opening before her, began, in her turn, to ask questions with such volubility, that poor Mrs Courtenay, in silent despair, laid down her work, and sat, patient and resigned, with her head bent forward, endeavouring to extract an answer for herself, since it seemed in vain to expect one directly from others. A few

words of explanation sufficed to prove that Laura was equally ignorant with themselves; but her wishes were so decidedly in favour of Edward's coming forward, that Charlotte, at least, felt little doubt as to his decision.

"He will have the cordial support of every one in the family, except Edith," said Jane; "she sets her face decidedly against it—why, no one can tell."

"And no one would wish to tell, I should think," observed Charlotte; "but you must not let her talk to Edward, Laura, if you wish to persuade him without trouble."

"I have no fear of any persuasion," began Laura, proudly; but her sentence was interrupted, for, at that instant, the door opened, and Edith appeared. —"Good-bye, I must go, the ponies will be very fidgetty if I keep them so long: Edith, you must excuse my running away, but ——"

"But you cannot rest till you have secured Edward's promise to stand for the county," said Charlotte, laughing. "You see, Edith, whom you will have to fight against."

Edith looked not merely vexed, but unhappy; and seeing that she should probably have no other opportunity of gaining a patient hearing, determined upon following Mr Dacre's advice, and endeavouring, if possible, to accomplish the object upon the importance of which he had so strongly insisted.

"I would not willingly detain you, Laura," she said; "but indeed it is of great consequence that I should say a few words to you alone."

Laura slightly shuddered, and recurred involuntarily to her many offences. "If it is of consequence," she replied, "I can say nothing; but I assure you I have no time to spare; would not to-morrow do?"

"I am afraid not, but really I will not keep you more than a few minutes;" and with a countenance

grave, almost to severity, Edith opened the folding doors, and ushered her sister-in-law into the library.

Laura sighed in submission to her fate, though at the same time feeling considerably irritated; for it was Edith's misfortune frequently to wear the appearance of pride, when she was in reality humble; and this was peculiarly the case in the present instance. The stiffness of manner, which to Laura appeared haughtiness and conceit, was in fact merely the effort to restrain deep and anxious feeling; but its effects were painfully repelling, especially when heightened by the constrained tone in which she began: "You must forgive me, Laura; I know it is not my part to interfere; but indeed it is only from a sense of duty."

The words were humble, but the tone was not; and Laura, from childhood unable to endure suspense, hastily interrupted her with—"I will forgive any thing you wish, if you will only tell me at once what is the matter—what have I done?"

"Nothing," replied Edith; "it is not what you have done, but what you are going to do."

"Me! I am not going to do any thing, except to drive back to Allingham."

"But you are intending, at least you said you were—you want Edward to stand for the county."

"Yes, certainly," said Laura, looking extremely surprised; "and so do you, I suppose; so do all his friends."

"Not his real friends," replied Edith; "those who sincerely value his happiness would most strongly urge upon him the folly of such a scheme. I am sure you would, Laura, if——"

"If what?" continued Laura; "am I not his sincere friend? Is not his happiness my happiness? Are not our interests one and the same? Why should you speak of ifs?"

"Because I don't think you have well considered the subject, and calculated the expenses. I think you are led away by excitement, and not likely to have an unbiassed judgment."

"Very possibly," said Laura, in a tone of pique; "but pray, have you the same opinion of Edward? I thought he was your paragon of excellence."

"My opinion of Edward has nothing to do with the case," said Edith, coldly; for any allusion to what she had formerly felt for her brother, was never patiently borne. "It is you, Laura, of whom I am speaking now. Every thing depends upon your influence; and you cannot tell the importance of what you are going to urge Edward to do."

"So I can well imagine. I daresay he will make a noise in the world, and be thought a great deal of."

"But that is all nothing," said Edith; "pray, pray, think of the expenses."

"No, indeed," exclaimed Laura; "that is not a wife's province. If Edward thinks he can afford it, I am sure I shall not be the person to say nay."

"And you will not warn him?" said Edith.

"Why should I? What are your objections?"

"I can't explain them all," replied Edith, looking embarrassed; "but some must be clear to every one."

"And you wish me to follow your guidance against my own inclinations?"

"Because I have your truest interest at heart," said Edith; "besides, it is impossible not to see the danger of extravagance."

"Extravagance! nonsense," repeated Laura; "if Edward cannot afford election expenses, I am certain he cannot afford to live in the style he does. He must have money at command, for I never ask for a thing which he does not give me."

"And therefore you would ruin him," said Edith

gravely. "Oh! Laura, listen to me but this once; I only desire to save you from suffering."

"I cannot understand you, Edith," said Laura, "and I am in a hurry."

"Only one moment," exclaimed Edith, in a tone of deep anxiety; "I am sure you don't know all, or you never could persist."

"I know that I am determined Edward shall be in Parliament."

"But won't you believe me?" said Edith: "I can have no object but your happiness."

"Indeed!" answered Laura ironically; "I should scarcely have supposed that from past experience, considering that the only harsh words Edward ever spoke to me, were caused by your remarks."

Poor Edith's eyes filled with tears. She remembered Mr Dacre's words: the solemnity with which he had reminded her of the account to be rendered for influence, as for every other talent; and she felt that hers had been neglected. Now, when it was so much needed, it was gone. It was the first time that Laura had ever directly alluded to the chief cause of their estrangement. Yet Edith dared not explain or apologise; for the opinion she had incautiously expressed, was still retained.

"Then you will not listen," she said, "and I must appeal to Edward."

"No, no," exclaimed Laura; "that shall never be. I will trust nothing that concerns us in any hands but my own. Whatever I may be in your eyes, I am dear and precious in my husband's; and I will never allow a cold, unsympathising perfection to come between me and him. Tell me what I am to say, and I will promise to deliver your message without variation."

"There is no need," replied Edith, as calmly as her agitation would allow. "I had hoped that you

would have consented to discuss the subject dispassionately; and then you might, perhaps, have been induced to view it in a different light. I know that Edward will be influenced, more than he will himself allow, by your wishes, and therefore I desired to enlist you on the side of prudence."

"And why, if I may ask," said Laura, drawing herself up, and speaking in a tone as calm, though less gentle—"why are you alone to be the judge of what is prudent? Why may not Edward be considered the fit guardian of his own affairs? And why should you urge upon a wife to undertake the task of dissuading her husband from his public duty?"

"Because there is a private duty which is more imperative," replied Edith; "and Edward knows it. I cannot say more; but since you have promised, Laura, to deliver any message which I may send, let it be that,—it may be but casting words to the wind, —yet it may also induce him to hesitate,—and to-morrow——" "I will see him myself," she was about to add, but something in the expression of Laura's countenance checked her.

"To-morrow," said Laura, "you will probably find that Edward has decided upon his duty without asking counsel of any one. If you have nothing to say upon any other subject, Edith, I had better go, for my time is valuable."

Edith coldly held out her hand, which Laura as coldly took. A formal good-bye was spoken on both sides; and, without returning to the drawing-room, Laura seated herself in her pony-carriage, and drove from the Priory. Edith watched her as she left the room, and listened to the departing sounds; and then, unable to control her vexation, shed tears of regret and self-reproach.

CHAPTER XXI.

PROUDLY as Laura had behaved during the interview with her sister-in-law, she was not entirely untouched by what had passed. Edith's opposition, though unaccountable, was still too earnest not to awaken some idea that it might be well-founded; and when the first excitement of her feelings had subsided, Laura resolved upon repeating to her husband all that had been said, without offering any comment of her own, and then demanding an explanation; but unfortunately the resolution was made at the very moment of passing the Grange, and the sound of Miss Forester's syren voice, as she stood by the lodge-gate, and entreated that her dear Mrs Courtenay would give her the pleasure of ten minutes' conversation, proved so soothing to Laura's temper, that she could not resist the temptation to alight. There was no difficulty in discovering that something had happened to disturb Laura's equanimity, and her openness of character quickly revealed the cause to one so keen in observation. Miss Forester's selfish tact had never, perhaps, been more carefully brought into play. She suggested a jealousy of Edith's influence over her brother, ridiculed the idea of prudence being necessary to a man of Edward's fortune, lauded his splendid talents, and repeated her father's opinion of his certain success; and then proceeded to describe in glowing colours the path that was open to his ambition—the position in which he would be placed—the popularity he would command—the gratification of being looked up to and courted—and Laura listened to the honied words, and yielded

unresistingly to the temptation of dreams so alluring to a young mind; and, before she left the Grange, gave a promise that if Edward were inclined to hesitate, no argument which she could use should be spared in inducing him to consent. The conversation lasted so long, that, on reaching Allingham, Laura found that dinner had already been announced, and heard with pleasure that General Forester was to be her guest. It was evident that Edward had not yet decidedly refused; and much as she longed to be with him alone, she was willing to bear the delay of a few hours, in the hope that the General's arguments would render her own entreaties needless. The dinner was dull and uninteresting. The General, a shrewd, worldly politician, bent upon obtaining Edward's consent, because it was most likely to ensure success to his party, and render himself a person of consequence, carefully abstained from all allusion to the subject uppermost in his thoughts, but could not prevent his attention from wandering from the trifling topics of conversation. Laura watched every change of her husband's countenance, in the hope of gaining some clue to his determination; and Edward sat silent, endeavouring to satisfy himself, that, in inviting General Forester to dinner, he had merely performed the part of a friend, without any wish of swerving from the resolution of the morning. At length the dessert was placed upon the table, and the servants retired; but Laura listened in vain for the subject in which she was so deeply interested. Farming and manufactures, railway and mining companies, were successively introduced and languidly discussed, but then came a solemn pause; and having lingered as long as etiquette could possibly allow, she was obliged to retire. The solitary evening seemed as if it would never end. Hour after hour wore away, and still the gentlemen in the dining-room continued

in earnest conversation. Laura ventured twice to summon them, but finding the message disregarded, gave up the attempt, and, after many endeavours to amuse herself, forgot her anxiety in sleep. She was awakened by the sound of voices in the hall. General Forester was taking his leave, thinking it too late again to intrude upon her. Edward's tones were so low as to be unintelligible, but the General's concluding words were perfectly audible,—" Then by eight to-morrow I shall hear from you:" and the next minute his carriage drove off.

Unable to restrain her eagerness, Laura, after waiting a few moments, hastened into the hall to meet her husband, but he was not there. She knocked at the door of his study, but received no answer; and was going back to the drawing-room again, when, the hall door being open, she caught sight of him in the colonnade. He was pacing it with rapid strides, his arms folded upon his breast; and the cold light of the moon, as it fell upon his noble features, so deepened their expression of thought and anxiety, that Laura became alarmed.

" Are you ill, Edward?" she exclaimed, suddenly arresting his progress.

Edward started, as if recalled from a dream. " Ill, my love? no; why should you think so?"

" But you are ill; you look so—pray come in."

" There is nothing for me to be afraid of on such a night as this," he replied; and he pointed to the glittering heavens; " but it is too late for you to remain."

" I could not rest even if I were to leave you; besides, Edward, your thoughts concern us both."

" Indirectly, perhaps; but politics are not a woman's business. I merely wish to consider something General Forester has been saying."

" And to decide that to-morrow you will consent to stand for the county," added Laura.

"Where did you hear it?" he exclaimed, "I thought it was merely a question of private business between the General and myself."

"It has long been considered a matter of course by every one; and this you know quite well, Edward; but my first intelligence of the dissolution was from the Priory."

"And what did they say there?" inquired Edward, with eagerness.

"Approved entirely, of course—all, that is, but Edith."

"Edith! did she object? what reason did she give?"

"None; at least none that I could understand; but she chilled me by her manner, and teased me with her words, and so I came away as soon as possible."

"She must have said something, though. Did she think me unfitted?"

"No, nothing of that kind. It appeared to be some notion of the expense which she had in her head; and then she talked about private duties. Stop, I think I can recollect the whole sentence; it was a sort of message to you. I was to tell you that there was a private duty which was more imperative than a public one."

The words were an abstract of Mr Dacre's arguments; and Edward, shrinking from their truth, turned away, unwilling to hear more. Laura watched him in silence, and then, fearful lest his determination should be about to fix in a direction contrary to her wishes, again ventured to interrupt him.

"You consider that women have no concern in politics," she said, putting her arm within his; "and yet you are anxious to know the opinion of your mother and sisters; and have you no thought also for your wife?"

"It is because I think of her too much, that I do

not speak to her on the subject," replied Edward, with a faint smile. "Only say that it is a matter of indifference to you, and I shall not be afraid to tell you what I have resolved upon."

"Not to decline!" exclaimed Laura, in a tone of extreme disappointment: "you could not have been so foolish."

"So wise, rather;—so willing to sacrifice every thing—ambition, and fame, and influence, for the interest of one who is dearer to me than my own life."

"And do you think," exclaimed Laura, pausing suddenly in her walk, "that your wife would be unwilling to risk the same consequences as yourself for the sake of seeing you what you ought to be? Would it not be worth any sacrifice to know that your talents were estimated,—to feel that you were honoured throughout the whole country? What can the consideration of a few paltry thousands be to such a prospect as yours, if you only consent to come forward?"

Edward was silent; but he gazed with a feeling of love and admiration, mingled with something of compassion, upon Laura's young and lovely features, lighted up with an enthusiasm, which, though false in its origin, might be directed to so much good; and drawing her towards him, said gently, "Laura, you will not ask me to do wrong—your husband could refuse you nothing."

"Then you will not refuse me this," exclaimed Laura, eagerly seizing upon the weakness caused by her own fascination, whilst the recollection of Miss Forester's brilliant prophecies came vividly before her. "It is the first, the sole object of my wishes; and it is not for myself alone,—it is for the good of thousands; you have yourself said it. What is to become of your resolution, dearest Edward, if you

shrink from the contest because you will not incur the expense?"

Edward pressed his hand upon his eyes, and sighed deeply; and little did Laura guess the bitterness of the struggle which was then passing in his breast— the last dying effort of duty to regain its power. "Laura," he said, at length, "you are urging me to a step, which when once taken, cannot be retraced. Are you indeed sure that you will never be inclined to repent having done it?"

"Never!" answered Laura, earnestly. "Whatever trouble or anxiety it may cause, I can never look back with regret upon having entreated you to place yourself in the position for which your fortune and talents have so evidently fitted you. But after all, Edward, why are you to be ruined by acting as thousands have done before you, who had not half your means?"

"It need not be ruin," replied Edward, attempting to smile; "certainly it would not be, if General Forester's offer were accepted."

"What offer? What has he said? You can have no secrets now from me."

"He proposes that the expenses should be borne by the gentlemen of the county, who are all willing to support me; and the plan is plausible, but Mr Dacre suggested objections."

"And have you really been consulting Mr Dacre?" exclaimed Laura; and there was something of scorn in her light, silvery laugh. "Have you determined upon making him your oracle in an affair which requires mere common sense and knowledge of the world?"

"I do not make him my oracle," replied Edward, proudly; "I would make no man such."

"Then why attach such weight to his opinion? It is but the decision of one man, and there are hundreds who would be against him."

Edward made no answer. The decision of that one man was, he well knew, the decision of an unbending, conscientious mind; and as the impression of the morning's conversation returned in full force, once more his wavering resolution might have been fixed, but for the jealousy of Mr Dacre, suggested by Laura's observation.

"It is not worthy of you, Edward," she continued; "and when you see what opportunities of good you have lost, it will not satisfy you to remember that you gave them up merely because you chose to follow Mr Dacre's dictation, rather than your own judgment."

"But what will he think when he finds that I have so soon changed my determination?"

"Rather, what will the world think when it is known that you have made it?"

"The world," repeated Edward mournfully, and walking a few paces aside, he leant against one of the pillars of the colonnade. For some minutes he continued silent, listening to the plashing of the fountains in the garden, as their slender columns rose into the still air, and then fell sparkling in the moonlight into their marble basins, while his gaze was fixed intently on the deep blue sky, through which the moon was tranquilly sailing, undimmed by even a passing shadow. "It is a glorious night," he said at length, as Laura drew near to him. "Is it not strange that we, upon whom such beauty has been lavished, should be so insensible to it?"

Laura looked at him in wonder. "Do you mean," she said, "that because we have been speaking upon other subjects, we are therefore unable to feel how lovely it is?"

"We do not feel it," replied Edward; "it is too calm—too pure. What has the world to do with the moon and the stars, and the unutterable vastness of the heavens?"

"I do not understand you," said Laura. "If it is wrong to think of the world, why should we have been sent to live in it?"

"I did not say it was wrong," replied Edward; "but it is so strange,—so incomprehensible. Tell me, Laura,—is not the bustle of the election more important in your eyes than all the beauty of nature?"

"Perhaps so, at this moment," replied Laura; "but it is natural."

"Yes, natural, perfectly natural; but that itself is the cause of wonder."

"It is not so to me," replied Laura. "The election is nothing, but you are every thing."

"Are you sure, dearest," said Edward, "that it is only for me you are anxious?"

"Do not ask that question again," replied Laura; "it implies distrust. If I have visions of distinction, they cannot be for myself; I am but a woman, and fame can be nothing to me."

"But we can be happy without fame," said Edward, in a tone which evidently showed his willingness that the assertion should be contradicted.

"Yes," exclaimed Laura; and again her clear, sweet voice was marred by an accent of sarcasm; "and we may be happy in a hovel, labouring with our hands for our daily bread. Philosophers tell us so—Mr Dacre is a philosopher."

"If there were no obstacles ——" began Edward, pursuing his own train of thought aloud, rather than replying to his wife's observation.

"I do not see them," interrupted Laura; "and surely I must be a better judge than Mr Dacre; he cannot be as intimately acquainted with all that concerns you as I am."

Edward's conscience painfully smote him. His first want of moral courage in not acquainting Laura with the encumbered state of his property was begin-

ning to work its punishment; for the only reason which could satisfy her of the propriety of his refusal was truth, and truth it seemed now impossible to tell. To confess that he had deceived her would, he felt, be a degradation; yet her implicit reliance upon his sincerity was more galling than the keenest reproach. Besides, he was becoming, every instant, more and more convinced that the obstacles of which he spoke were not insurmountable. At the distance of several hours Mr Dacre's suggestions were seen through a dim unsubstantial haze, while General Forester's baits hung rich and glittering before him. He had been promised the support of almost every man of consequence in the county; flattered with insidious praises of his talents, bribed by the hope of lucrative and honourable appointments; and now he required but one more inducement to determine the balance, and this was Laura's entreaty; and Laura's natural inclinations had been strengthened by Miss Forester's influence, and Miss Forester's influence was mainly to be attributed to Edith's neglect. How little can we discover of the secret chain of human events! and how little did Edith imagine, as she sat alone in her chamber, dwelling in wretchedness of heart upon the fatal step her brother was meditating, that her own conduct was one of the ultimate causes of the decision he was about to make! Laura perceived the wavering of her husband's mind, and well knew how to take advantage of it. It was not the first occasion on which she had exerted her power over his affections to gain an object desired; and now, gently forcing him to re-enter the house, she led him into the drawing-room, and seating herself by his side, looked up into his face with a smile of such exquisite sweetness, that a man of far greater strength of mind than Edward might easily have found his resolution shaken; and then she said—

"For your wife's sake, Edward; it is the first wish of her heart."

Edward's countenance was grave, but his tones were yielding, as he replied: "And when I am taxed with imprudence and ambition, will my wife uphold my cause? Or, if others undertake my expenses, will she answer that my affairs shall be conducted in an honourable manner?"

"This is beyond my comprehension," exclaimed Laura, laughing. "You have been talking to Mr Dacre, Edward, till you are become as visionary as himself. Do tell me all his objections in a few words."

"He allows that there are but two—the expense being one; this would in a measure be done away by accepting General Forester's proposal: but the next difficulty seems to be, that if the management of the affair is to be taken out of my hands, I shall not be able to put a stop to any thing I may think wrong in the way in which it is carried on."

"How extremely absurd!" exclaimed Laura: "so like Mr Dacre's ultra-particularity; as if it were possible to have an election conducted without things being done to which one must shut one's eyes. And so, Edward, you will throw away your greatest chance of being really useful to your country, upon a mere scruple of conscience, which common sense must at once condemn?"

Edward did not exactly see the truth of this observation, but it was given authoritatively, and sounded well; and he was not inclined to contradict it. "I must own," he replied, "that Mr Dacre's arguments do not strike me as unanswerable. It would be at my option to retire if I saw things going on in a manner which I disapproved."

"Certainly it would," exclaimed Laura; "and the example then would be more valuable than all which you do or say now."

"I should retire undoubtedly," repeated Edward; "nothing would induce me to allow the horrid system of bribery and wickedness which generally accompanies an election; and I own I should be glad to show the world that a business of this nature may be carried on on high principles."

Laura placed a sheet of paper before him, and put a pen into his hand. Edward still hesitated. "Mr Dacre will think it very strange."

"Still Mr Dacre!" exclaimed Laura, impatiently. "I did not think you were to be governed so easily."

The arrow was rightly aimed. Fear of being led was Edward's most vulnerable point; and, taking up the pen, he commenced a letter to General Forester. Laura leant over him as he proceeded, strengthening his resolution by insisting upon the benefit to be derived from such an example as his must necessarily be; and when the letter was concluded, Edward delivered it to his servant, with strict injunctions that it was to be sent to the Grange before eight o'clock the next morning, and retired to rest with scarcely a doubt that he had acted nobly and conscientiously.

CHAPTER XXII.

When Edith met Mr Dacre after the first public announcement of Edward's intentions, it was in the drawing-room at the Priory, and in the company of strangers, where private conversation was impossible; and nothing but an earnest pressure of the hand showed that he understood and felt for her uneasiness. The chances of the election were then under discussion, and she was compelled to listen with apparent indifference to hopes, fears, and congratulations, which were all equally painful; until Mr Dacre, with a tact and delicacy peculiar to himself, led the conversation from the election in particular to elections in general, and from them to the political subjects of the day, and the customs and habits of foreign countries; and Edith was again at ease. One look, one more cordial shake of the hand, as they parted, told her gratitude; and then, as if by mutual consent, the subject was avoided during several succeeding interviews. Both felt that conversation was useless, and could not be entered into without throwing reproach upon Edward. But Mr Dacre, though a silent, was not an unobservant spectator of what was passing, and each day gave him more reason to apprehend the consequences of Edward's weakness. Allingham was now the centre of attraction to the whole neighbourhood; for Mr Courtenay, with lavish hospitality, opened his house not only to his friends, but to his most distant acquaintances; and, casting aside his weekly bills, contented himself with the belief that it was absurd to think of expense at such a moment,—the election must cost him something, and it was better to let every thing take its course, and do what was absolutely

necessary, without making himself uneasy as to the result. And Laura entirely agreed. She was now in her element—admired, courted, flattered, caressed, by all who sought their own interest through Edward's advancement, and by many who, with greater disinterestedness, were captivated by her beauty, grace, and vivacity. Every day she was assured of the certainty of Edward's success, and that, when once in Parliament, he would necessarily be placed amongst the most distinguished men of the age; and with her youthful ignorance, and warm affections, she implicitly believed all that was told her, and already began to contemplate the duties which must devolve on the wife of a Secretary of State, or, it might be, the First Lord of the Treasury. During this time Edith withdrew herself more and more from her own family circle, and found her greatest relief in solitude at home, and active exertion abroad. She wrote also frequently to Gertrude; for the advantages of the election were in themselves so doubtful, that she was able, without any breach of confidence, to express her disapprobation; and Gertrude's letters in return were so considerate, so full of gentleness and sympathy, that, at times, Edith felt as if the diminution of her brother's regard was repaid by the increased affection between herself and her absent sister. But in that one word "absent," was contained the great obstacle to her comfort. No love, no interest, however sincere, could make amends for the want of daily intercourse; and once Edith was on the point of writing to entreat that Gertrude would come to them, if it were only for a few weeks; but the same day's post brought such painful accounts of Mrs Heathfield's debility and suffering, that she felt it would be selfish even to indulge the wish. Unfortunately, it was on that morning also that the nomination day was publicly announced, and this alone would have been sufficient to depress her; for while all others were in the highest

spirits, delighting in the brightness of Edward's prospects, she believed that they were delusive. Miss Forester especially was full of flattering prophecies; and feeling delighted at Mr Dacre's more frequent visits to the Grange, which she attributed entirely to his increasing regard for herself and her father, she rejoiced equally in the prospect of excitement and gaiety for the present, and the hope of a splendid legacy, if not a fortune, for the future; while she flitted between Allingham, and the Grange, and the Priory, as unceasingly as if every thing depended upon her gossiping information of what was going on. Edith spent a part of the morning alone, answering Gertrude's letter; and then, carefully stealing into the dining-room, when she was sure that every one else had left it, ate her hasty and uncomfortable luncheon, and went out as usual to visit some poor people. Amongst them, old Martha had the chief claim upon her attention. The illness with which she had been attacked was rapidly gaining ground, and every day brought some fresh symptom of declining strength and powers. Edith willingly gave her all the time that could be spared from her other engagements, and was thankful to perceive that the secret feelings of gratitude and devotion which had occasionally been hidden by the old woman's roughness of manner, had now the effect of softening her natural infirmity of temper, and enabling her to bear her trials with patience. Yet there was an oppressive contrast between the careless merriment, the stir and interest, which surrounded Edith's domestic life, and the awful truths so clearly brought to view as she stood by the poor old woman's sick bed. Even when repentance and faith gave an earnest of happiness to come, it was impossible to watch in silence the sinking struggles of a spirit about to appear before its Maker, and not to feel that death and eternity, and the inward preparation of the soul, were the realities of existence; and fame and riches

nothing but the delusions of a perishing world; and though, happily for Edith's peace of mind, she did not understand the share which Edward had had in aggravating Martha's sufferings, it was with a feeling approaching to terror that, in the midst of light words, and gay smiles, she sometimes recalled the image of the dying woman, and involuntarily placed it in stern contrast with those about her, outwardly so different —but soon, it might be, to be brought into the same condition.

There were seasons when she could almost have envied them their thoughtlessness. Yet she had no cause. Edward himself, in the height of his popularity, and, according to all human probability, about to attain his highest wishes, had moments, and even hours, of suffering to which Edith's anxieties were as nothing. He had plunged into the whirlpool, and he was carried on without his will, but not without his knowledge. Mr Dacre's words were realized; and he was no longer master of his own actions. With a sense of honour almost fastidious, he was dragged into the trickery of an election; forced, if not to say and do himself, yet to consent that others should say and do for him, things from which both his taste and his principles revolted. He had put himself into the hands of a party, without inquiring into their intentions, and his punishment was bitterly felt. The idea of drawing back,—that one point on which he had dwelt so much before-hand,—did at times cross his mind, but it was rejected. The interests of his friends, and his own honour, were at stake; for after the support that had been tendered and accepted, he felt bound to carry the contest to its conclusion. What the event would be, his supporters did not seem to doubt; but the possibility of sacrificing so much, and gaining nothing in return, sometimes crossed Edward's mind with a pang of dread; and then he exerted himself more, and gave way to whatever was pro-

posed, and at last wrought himself up to a pitch of feverish excitement which carried him through any difficulties, but also made him sink under any temptations. And time fled swiftly on, affording but few and transient intervals for thought, till the night preceding the nomination day. The midnight clock had struck, and the household at Allingham were gone to rest. Silence, and the semblance of peace, reigned throughout the mansion; but a light still gleamed through the window of one room, where, seated at a table covered with papers, Edward was engaged in writing. It was but a calculation of votes which he was making, for the fifth time, on that day; but his thoughts were intently occupied, and without his notice the door of the apartment was softly opened, and Laura, gliding into the room, laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Edward, this must not be; you will never be able to stand the fatigue of to-morrow. Why should you sit up longer?"

"Because I cannot sleep. When to-morrow is over ——"

"And the polling days," added Laura.

"To-morrow will perhaps decide. Mr Vivian is sure to resign if he sees the case is hopeless."

"Then all anxiety may be at rest in a few hours," exclaimed Laura, and her face brightened; "and we shall be thankful and happy. You could not bear this life long."

"Bear it! No, indeed; but Laura, there may be something worse, if I fail."

"Impossible! you have reckoned every chance of disappointment."

"But if I should?"

"Why mention it, or think of it?" said Laura.

"Only tell me how you should feel; I shall be less uneasy if I know you are prepared for every thing."

"But I am not prepared; I never should be. After the trouble, and the exertion, and the ——"

"What?"

"The misery, I was going to say; but it seems too strong a word."

"It is misery!" exclaimed Edward; "If I could have known one-half of what I have had to bear, I should never have ventured upon the undertaking."

"And to fail after all," said Laura; "it could not be."

Edward rested his head upon his hand: it was one of his short intervals of repentance, and the errors which he had been striving to banish from his mind crowded before him. Laura leant over him, and kissed his forehead, and endeavoured to cheer him by repeating the almost certainty of success; but it was not the comfort which Edward needed.

"This is weakness in you," she said, at length; "who would imagine, to see you as you have been, —as you will be again to-morrow, that fear could have such power over your mind."

"Oh! Laura," exclaimed Edward, "how little you know! Who can judge except myself whether the prize is worth the sacrifice?"

"I can," said Laura, firmly. "When the day is gained, and you feel that you have the power of doing good to thousands, you will laugh at your own doubts."

"Good," repeated Edward thoughtfully: "if I could be sure of that ——"

"I will not listen to you," said Laura. "This is but the distrust of a morbid mind. You shall not write any more," and she took the paper from his hands.

"I must look over it once again," said Edward, with a deep sigh. "I am not satisfied. What did you do with the other corrected list?"

Laura began searching amongst a collection of books on a side table, and after some moments took up a long roll of papers. She brought it to the light, but it was not the list of voters,—it was the plan for Torrington church, and she was about to throw it aside,

when Edward unfolded it. The design was his own, and many were the hours of enjoyment it had afforded him. "But now,"—Laura spoke his thoughts as she unrolled the list of voters, which she had just found, and placed it by the side of the church;—"that is gone by," she said: "it can never be done."

"Why should you say so?" inquired Edward, with something of irritation in his manner.

"Because it is impossible. Even I, with my careless notions, can see that: but, dearest Edward, you look really unhappy, as if you had done something wrong; and, after all, it is but exchanging one duty for another."

For once, Edward was deaf to the flattering sweetness of his wife's accents. "Leave me! leave me!" he exclaimed.

"Then you will not sit, foreboding evil, Edward. Remember, you have intended only to do good."

Edward's answer was a hasty motion of his hand, and Laura saw by his countenance that she must not urge him farther. She did leave him to the trial of his own thoughts; and it was not till morning dawned that Edward's mingled agitation and remorse were subdued, and he closed his eyes to gain a few hours rest, before the coming fatigue of the day.

The election morning shone bright and beautiful—a dazzling sun and an unclouded sky—and Edward, forgetting the suffering of the previous night, felt the flush of exultation as he welcomed his friends at the breakfast table, and listened to the confident assurances of success which reached him on all sides. The numbers had been calculated again and again; every doubtful vote had been set aside, and the lowest computation made, yet a large majority was fully anticipated on the first day's poll.

"And without doubt," said General Forester, who had been talking in a mysterious under-tone to Edward, in order to convince the rest of the party that

he was the most important man amongst them; "without doubt the affair will be ended to-day. Vivian will of a certainty withdraw. I heard it in a round-about way, but from most excellent authority; and it will be just like him; exactly what a haughty fellow would do. He knows what a victory we shall gain if he persists in carrying matters to extremities. Your friends at Elsham are to have the earliest intelligence, that they may ring you a welcome on your return."

Edward smiled incredulously, and could not promise himself so easy a victory; but his spirits were raised by the certainty of those on whom he most depended; and when the splendid procession, with its long train of carriages, and well-mounted horsemen, and waving banners, at length set forth, he could scarcely believe the possibility of a defeat.

The day was one of interest and excitement to the whole neighbourhood; all who could find means of conveyance, and rooms for their accommodation, whether feeling personally interested in the election, or considering it merely an amusement for the passing hour, crowded to the county-town, which was distant about four miles, and amongst them the first, and the most anxious, were Mrs Courtenay and her two eldest daughters. But Edith was absent. Entreaties, and sarcasm, and ridicule had been used in vain. Her refusal was given decidedly, and not quite graciously; and when Mrs Courtenay and Jane had seated themselves in a comfortable lounging position, and were duly provided with salts and Eau de Cologne, and Charlotte had properly arranged the folds of her peach-blossomed silk dress, and given the final shake to the falling feather in her white bonnet, the carriage drove from the door; and Edith, taking up a book, resolved to occupy herself strenuously, and not to allow her mind to dwell upon a subject so entirely beyond her control. But she had miscalculated her

powers. The words were before her eyes, but they were not regarded; and the sentences were in her thoughts, but they were not understood; and after half an hour's fruitless effort, she turned to another occupation. This soon proved wearisome; and at last, with a faint hope of relief from restlessness, she resolved upon a walk. It was a sultry, oppressive afternoon; a dim mist was floating in the horizon, and a few white clouds rising against the wind, gave signs of an approaching thunder-storm. There was a deep stillness prevailing around; even the hum of the insects had ceased, and large flocks of birds, fore-warned by instinct of coming danger, were swiftly wheeling their flight homewards. But Edith scarcely noticed these symptoms; her mind was wholly engrossed, although her ideas were wandering and unconnected, turning from the present to the future, and in a moment reverting to the past, often without any apparent chain of association. She thought of Edward, and his prospects; of the change which that day's success might make in his destiny for life; and of the pride which her father would have felt in seeing him occupy a position of such importance. And then she dwelt, almost with regret, upon the total extinction of the elder branch of her family; and the painful surprise which Colonel Courtenay would have experienced, if, before his death, he could have known how soon his name would be uncared for, when his place was filled by another. And again she recurred to the future—to the question how soon it might be the same with Edward; and in the uncertainty of even the longest life the delusion of earthly honours seemed more startling to her reason than it had ever done before; while at the very instant her heart beat quickly as in fancy she heard the sound of the Elsham bells, and remembered that a peal from them was to be the signal of Edward's triumph.

Finding her anxiety increase as the time drew

near for the return of the election party, Edith continued her walk towards the village, with a secret hope of meeting some one who might voluntarily give her the information which she had not the courage to ask. Once she passed the turning to Martha's cottage, and felt partly inclined to go to her; but the hope that her mind might be more at ease in another quarter of an hour, induced her to follow her first intention; and it was not till she had nearly reached the beginning of the village, without meeting a single person, that she decided upon returning. On approaching the cottage, the young girl who had lately been Martha's attendant, came out of it, dressed as if going upon an errand. Yet, natural as the circumstance was, a strange foreboding of something sad and unusual flashed in an instant upon Edith's mind. She quickened her steps, and when the girl drew near, asked eagerly, and, as if certain of the answer, whether the poor old woman was much worse. "They think she is dying, Miss Edith," was the reply, "and you said you would be told."

"Dying!" repeated Edith, shocked at the suddenness of the intelligence, notwithstanding her previous impression. "Why was I not sent for before?"

"The change was so quick, Miss," answered the girl; "only within this quarter of an hour, and the doctor was called, but he was out; and Mr Grantley is there, and one or two of the neighbours, and they are doing all they can; some of them thought you had better not know, but I was sure you would be angry if you didn't."

Edith waited no longer, and without inquiring whether Martha was sufficiently sensible to derive any comfort from her presence, hastened forwards. But she was scarcely prepared for the scene which presented itself. The sick woman was stretched upon her low bed; her arms extended upon the dingy coverlid, and her hands feebly moving. The paleness of death was

resting upon her wrinkled brow and hollow cheek, and her dim, half-closed eye, and distorted mouth, showed that the last struggle of mortality was at hand. Yet sense and consciousness still lingered, and with them the longing for that support in the hour of trial which prayer alone can obtain; and as Edith lifted the latch, and softly entered the cottage, the first sound that fell upon her ear, mingled with the moanings of the suffering woman, was the solemn entreaty to the "Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, that He would look graciously upon His servant, and strengthen her with His Holy Spirit."

Edith's natural impulse was to draw back, half in alarm, and half fearful of intrusion; but the words of fervent intercession calmed her agitation, and after a few moments she also knelt to ask that the pardon of the immortal spirit might be "sealed in heaven" before it was summoned from the earth. Deep and earnest was the petition, and as it proceeded poor Martha's restless murmurings were stilled, and a fixed but tranquil expression settled upon her wasted features. Edith buried her face in her hands, and continued kneeling after the prayer was ended. There was an awful silence in the chamber, broken only by the quick, faint breathing of departing life; and then, from without, was heard a distant heavy roll of thunder,—another, and another. One vivid lightning-flash lit up the rigid countenance of the dying woman; and when it passed away, there came, blended with the peal of the advancing storm, a clear joyous sound of village bells. Edith started. One glance she cast upon the bed, and it told that all was over. The tumult of life, and the fearful stillness of death, had met in that hour. One spirit had passed to the world where riches and honours are nothing, and another had entered with pride and hope upon a new era of mortal existence.—Edward Courtenay had gained the object of his ambition.

CHAPTER XXIII.

We must pass over the space of four years before we again attempt to watch the progress of events at Allingham and the Priory. Time, which produces so great an effect upon all things gifted with life, had made but little alteration in the internal appearance of either place; and the drawing-room at Allingham, on the morning on which we would resume our story, was, in its principal features, such as it had been when Laura was first introduced into it, save only that her husband's affection had induced him to gratify her wishes to the utmost, and open it, as she desired, upon the conservatory. Its inmates, however, were not so entirely the same. Laura was seated at her work-table, with a form as elegant, and a face as lovely as ever; but the careless thoughtlessness of very early youth had faded from her open brow and brilliant eye; and except when she gazed, with a mother's fondness, upon the beautiful boy who was playing at her feet, it was easy to perceive that her heart was burdened with many a secret care. At a little distance from her stood Edward, his countenance expressive of a restless dissatisfied mind, and by his side a plainly-dressed elderly man, who, with bent brows and a care-worn face, was turning over some folded papers which lay upon the table. Edward looked on without speaking, but a few heavy sighs involuntarily escaped him, as from time to time he pondered the titles of the different packets. There was an air of business and solicitude in the countenances of all; the only sound, except the rustling of the papers, which disturbed the solemnity of the

little party, being the occasional laugh of the merry child, whose attention seemed fully engrossed by the presence of a young lady dressed in deep mourning, who was seated on a sofa at the farther end of the apartment, and beckoning him towards her. She had, apparently, but just entered the house, for she still wore her walking-dress, although her bonnet was thrown aside, as if to enable her more easily to amuse herself with her little playfellow. Her figure was slight and delicate, and her face chiefly remarkable for a high, thoughtful forehead, and a mouth which, although indicating great gentleness, betokened also a spirit of natural energy and decision. Her complexion was sallow, and her clear, dark grey eyes told rather of a sensible meditative mind, than of any superior quickness of intellect. Yet Gertrude Courtenay was not a person to be seen and forgotten. Even by the side of her beautiful sister-in-law, it might have been doubted which possessed the greatest power of awakening interest. At a first notice, it would have been said that hundreds in the world resembled her—that such features were to be met with continually; a second glance more firmly riveted attention, from the expression of inward peace which pervaded her countenance; a third established as a certainty that there must be something in her very different from the world; and when she moved and spoke the charm was completed. There was no resisting the winning tones of that low clear voice, the softness and quietness of those gentle actions, the least of which seemed inspired by some consideration for another, some wish to give pleasure or comfort. Whether Gertrude's disposition was naturally lively, had often been a question with her friends; and, on a slight acquaintance, it might perhaps have been supposed that some suffering in early childhood had subdued her spirit, and cast a shade over the light-

heartedness of youth; but it was an opinion contradicted by the mirth which so frequently lighted up her eye when her manner was the most self-possessed, and by the delight with which she was welcomed by the companions of her own age in their gayest and happiest hours. No one felt her presence a restraint, except in moments of heedless folly, and then one look was sufficient. If she refused to smile, the thoughtless laugh was instantly checked;—and yet Gertrude seldom ventured to find fault, and when she did, it was with such humility, such consciousness of her own deficiencies, that no offence could be taken. The magic of her influence was to be found, not in words—scarcely in actions—but in her inward, unceasing remembrance of the God in whose presence she lived. It was her earnest endeavour never to forget Him, and the recollection purified her heart, and hallowed her daily conduct, until the careless and worldly-minded felt that the atmosphere with which she was surrounded was one in which they could not venture to dwell.

Even now, as she sat with her eyes fixed upon the laughing child, who, after conquering his pretended shyness, ran eagerly towards her and jumped into her lap, there was something in her countenance which bespoke a mind that naturally turned to subjects beyond the amusement of the moment. It seemed to be the pressure of a first grief that checked the bright smile with which she gazed upon her little companion, for there were traces of sorrow in her voice and manner, as well as in her mourning dress; but Gertrude's affliction was blended with so many thoughts of happiness, that it could only cast a temporary gloom over her feelings. She had lost her aunt about six weeks previously, and the separation from her best and earliest friend was, in itself, a bitter trial. But Mrs Heathfield's great age and

weakness had prevented her for the last two years from being in any degree a companion to her niece; and one who had watched her patient suffering, and perfect resignation, could scarcely lament when a spirit so purified by earthly trial was at length summoned to its rest. After the time spent in making some necessary arrangements, and paying a short visit to a friend in the neighbourhood of Farleigh, Gertrude's natural wish was to return to her mother's roof, for there was a pleasure expected in the home of her childhood, and the society of her family, to which, notwithstanding the remembrance of her former disappointment, few could have been more alive. The few days she had as yet passed at the Priory had been so full of novelty and interest, as often to divert her mind from thoughts of grief; whilst, from the same circumstances, she still remained in some degree ignorant of the extent of those sources of annoyance which lay hidden under an exterior at first sight so promising. Gertrude's return had been hailed with delight by all. Mrs Courtenay received her with the warmth and sincerity of a mother's affection, and Jane forgot her illness, and Charlotte her sarcasm, in the pleasure of welcoming her, whilst Edith's spirits rose to their former cheerfulness in the prospect of a companion who could understand her feelings. For the time, Gertrude was the one object of attraction at the Priory, and hardly less so at Allingham, though Edward was sometimes conscious of something uncongenial in the guileless openness of his sister's disposition, and Laura was not sure that she enjoyed the presence of one whose actions were perpetually reminding her of her own deficiencies. The little boy was the great link between them, for grief can often find solace in the simple innocence of childhood, and no mother can withstand the most endearing of

all attentions—that shown to an only child. Neither was Edward insensible to the interest taken by his sister in the one object on which all his hopes and all his ambition were centred; and on this morning, as he stood by the table, apparently intent only upon business, his eyes often wandered to the farther end of the room, and for a few moments he forgot his cares whilst watching Gertrude's endeavours to retain her restless charge.

"Hush! Charlie, hush!" she said, softly, as the spell of silence was again broken by a joyous laugh. "We must be quiet. Hark! listen to my watch."

The little fellow laid his head upon her shoulder, and seemed wrapt in wonder at the hidden sound; and Gertrude bending over him, parted his clustering ringlets, and kissed his fair delicate forehead. "Charlie loves Aunt Gertrude!" whispered the child, as he threw his arms round her neck. There was a slight quivering in Gertrude's lip, a momentary glistening in her eye; perhaps the tone of innocent affection,—even the affection of infancy,—came home to her the more forcibly from the remembrance of all that she had lately lost; and hastily lifting the little boy from her lap, she moved towards the distant window at which Laura was working.

"We ought to beg your pardon, dear Gertrude, for bringing business into the drawing-room," said Edward: "I did not intend troubling you or Laura so long when we began talking, or I should have gone to my study."

"No one will complain of the trouble if you can be cheerful about it," said Laura. "But indeed, Mr Rivers, the sight of you will soon be associated with every thing that is depressing. Edward is not like himself for two or three days after you have teased him with those horrid papers."

"Nay, my dear Laura," replied Edward, "you

must not say that Mr Rivers teases me; it is I who tease myself. He is always begging me to have nothing more to do with them."

"Certainly," said Mr Rivers, in a serious voice; "if I might be allowed to say it without offending you, I must own that it would give me great satisfaction to feel that they were the last with which I should have any connexion."

"Then I will promise you," said Edward, with a laugh which sounded hollow and unreal: "since you have such an objection to them, you must not think it strange if I trouble others rather than yourself the next time they are required."

Mr Rivers took up his hat, bowed to Laura, and walked to the door, followed by Mr Courtenay.

"You understand me," said Edward in an undertone, as he held out his hand; "I can quite appreciate your kindness, but if this sort of thing is painful, why should you be worried with it?"

"It is not painful for me, only for yourself," replied Mr Rivers. "You do not know the end, and I do. I have seen, I may almost say hundreds, running a similar course."

Edward knit his brow, but in suffering, not in anger. "What would you have me do? What can I do?"

"Retrench. It was my first, and it will be my last word. You must excuse my saying it; we are not acquaintances of yesterday."

"Again I must ask, how is it to be managed?" replied Edward.

Mr Rivers smiled gravely: "We have discussed the subject often," he said; "and I fear there is nothing new to be brought forward. I must wish you good morning, now, for my time is precious."

"Those dreadful lawyers!" exclaimed Laura, when Edward returned to the table. "Why should

you have any thing to do with them? with Rivers in particular? he is a complete bird of ill-omen."

"That may not be his fault," replied Edward; "but we will not trouble Gertrude with business: she is come to pass the day here, of course."

"Not quite that," said Gertrude; "I expect Edith every minute, and then I have promised to go for a long walk with her to Torrington Heath; but she was engaged at home when I left her, and I thought it would be pleasant to spend my spare minutes here."

Laura looked pleased; but Edward was recalled to the recollection of something disagreeable by his sister's words. "Torrington," he repeated thoughtfully. "Oh! I remember, now. Those unhappy poachers were to be brought here at twelve, and it must be nearly that."

"Five minutes after," observed Laura, looking at her watch, and almost at the same instant a servant entered to summon his master away. Edward gave orders that the men should be taken to his study, but still lingered, as if unwilling to enter upon a painful office.

"If it were not Torrington, you would not care," exclaimed Laura, with a smile which had in it something of the arch brightness of former days. But the smile had lost its power. Edward's brow grew darker, and his manner sterner, and without noticing the observation he left the room.

When he was gone, Laura's countenance resumed its former expression of care, and turning to her sister, she said, "You will have the thanks of the county if you will undertake to reform the Torrington people, Gertrude. That is your mission, I suppose."

"Hardly," replied Gertrude, smiling; "I really don't know why we are going there to-day; only Edith wished it."

"I beg Edward not to worry himself about them," continued Laura; "but he will do it. You know the greater part of the hamlet belongs to him, and it is out of Mr Grantley's parish; and the rector is a very old man, who can do nothing himself, and cannot afford to keep a curate; and the nearest church is two miles distant: so the people are left to themselves, and certainly they are a set of desperate wretches, beggars, and thieves, and poachers, and even worse, some people say. But what good can it be to distress oneself about a case in which we can do nothing?"

"Yes, if we really can do nothing," said Gertrude, in a tone so gentle, that it scarcely seemed to imply reproof.

"Is it not so?" inquired Laura. "Think of the enormous claims Edward has upon him. The mere expense of his parliamentary dinners, and his house in town, is enough to ruin him. And he is not like a common person—people think so much of him for his talents; he is forced to be a great man, whether he will or not."

Gertrude was not forced to give an opinion in answer, for the conversation was changed by Laura's exclamation that a carriage was coming down the road.

"It is my mother," said Gertrude, going to the window; "she and Jane proposed taking a drive this morning, but they did not say they were coming here."

"They do not often favour me," observed Laura; "your mother is so nervous, and Jane such an invalid; that is, according to her own account."

Mrs Courtenay appeared, wrapped in a silk cloak and furs, although the bright April morning would have rendered an ordinary spring dress oppressive to many; and Jane followed with languishing steps, and a countenance which evidently demanded sympathy.

"Ah! Gertrude, are you here?" was her mother's first exclamation. "Why did you not wait for the carriage? it would have been much pleasanter. They persuaded me to go out to-day, my dear Laura, so I told the coachman to drive here; but I don't know—your road is very steep, it frightens me to death."

"Then it would not probably have been agreeable to Gertrude," said Jane shortly, as she took possession of an easy chair.

"I am not sure of that," replied Gertrude. "Persons' nerves are very different when they are young, from what they are as they grow old. Let me take off your cloak, dear mamma, or you will find the change by-and-by."

"Thank you, my love, perhaps it will be best. Now, Charlie, come and speak to grandmamma." The child hesitated, from wilfulness and shyness.

"Don't be naughty, Charlie," said Laura, in a voice of mild entreaty. Charlie moved a few steps forward, and then turning quickly round, ran and hid his face in Gertrude's lap. "Never mind," continued Laura, "he will go presently; he is not accustomed to see so many people in a room, and I think he is cutting a tooth; he has been so fretful for the last few days."

"What a blessing children's teeth are to them!" observed Jane; "they bear the burden of every fault!"

The colour rose in Laura's cheek.

"Poor little darling!" said Mrs Courtenay. "Have you tried the soothing syrup, my dear? I am certain it will do wonders. My grandmother constantly used it. She had seven children, and most of them had strong convulsions in cutting their teeth. It was a great trial to her, and only three lived beyond two years."

"An additional reason for Laura's putting faith

in it," said Jane. "Gertrude, you seem to be the favourite: why don't you attempt to rival our great grandmother's soothing syrup, and persuade Charlie to be a good boy?"

"Perhaps we had better let the matter rest," said Gertrude. "Laura thinks he is not well."

The yielding tone of this reply had as great an effect upon Laura's irritated feelings as the celebrated syrup could possibly have had upon her little boy, and she immediately begged that Gertrude would make him do what was right; but whether the endeavour would have been successful, was not destined to be known; for at that instant Edward re-appeared, followed almost immediately by Edith.

"Have you been waiting for me long, Gertrude?" asked Edith, after she had coolly shaken hands with Laura, and kissed the child. Gertrude's reply was attentive, as usual, though at the instant her thoughts were engrossed by the painful expression of her brother's face. His conversation with his mother was evidently constrained; and Laura, although lately accustomed to see him gloomy, could not avoid noticing his manner.

"What have you done about the poachers, Edward?" she inquired, in a tone of greater timidity than she would have used four years before.

"Nothing," was the reply: "it is a bad business. My keeper is much hurt, and the affair must be inquired into more."

"Torrington people, I suppose," said Jane. "One never has a doubt upon that point."

"Torrington is not in this parish, I believe?" said Gertrude, who perceived directly, that Edward was anxious to avoid the subject of the poachers, and hoped to turn the conversation unperceived.

"No, my dear," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay, "it is in the parish of Ringwood—old Mr North's. Your

grandfather gave him the living—four hundred a-year it used to be. Every one thought Mr North would have died ten years ago, but now no one seems to think about it."

"Poor Torrington!" said Edith; "it is a miserable place; no schools, no clergyman, no any thing."

"And they are such a bad, ungrateful set," observed Mrs Courtenay. "They abuse you so dreadfully, my dear Edward. Miss Forester was with me for a whole hour yesterday, telling me all about it. She says they grow worse and worse; and ——"

"Do you want your pony carriage this afternoon, Laura?" said Edward, contrary to his usual habit, interrupting his mother in the middle of a sentence.

"Not if you do. I had settled to take a drive."

"I cannot want it," replied Edward. "I only thought it might as well be ordered in time, and perhaps Gertrude would like to go with you."

Laura blushed, and hesitated; and Gertrude began to decline, saying, "that she had a prior engagement with Edith, but she should be very glad to take advantage of the offer another day."

"Then to-morrow," persisted Edward. Gertrude again glanced at her sister-in-law, and reading her wishes in her countenance, laughingly observed, that "it would not do for such a busy person as herself to form plans beforehand. She had undertaken to make acquaintance with the whole neighbourhood, and she must not think of mere pleasure."

"That is right, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "I am so glad you like paying visits. Poor Jane never can, and Edith has no time; and so Charlotte is left alone, and has to do it all, and I know we are sadly rude: but now you are come, Gertrude, there will be no difficulty. You can always go, since you enjoy it."

"I don't know that I exactly enjoy it, dear mamma,"

said Gertrude; "but I shall be very willing to take my share in the duty."

"We are going into Elsham, now," said Jane; "but I suppose you won't give up your walk for the pleasure of accompanying us."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Edith. "It is the first walk Gertrude and I have promised ourselves. Indeed, Jane, you must not think of such a thing."

"I never knew before there was any harm in thinking," said Jane: "but you need not be frightened, Edith; I am not going to run away with your new idol."

"Not till the new idol runs away with you herself," replied Gertrude. "You know, Jane, I must pay visits by-and-by, and then I shall be most thankful to any one who will take the trouble to go with me."

Jane was soothed by her sister's manner; and, in a more good-humoured tone than usual, proposed to her mother that the carriage should be ordered round. Mrs Courtenay made no objection; and after ten minutes spent in adjusting cloaks, saying good-bye, and bribing the little boy to good behaviour by the promise of sugar-plums, the formal morning visit was concluded. Gertrude followed her mother to the carriage, to see that she was comfortably settled, and to endeavour, if possible, to arrange Jane's cushion for the head in the way she deemed indispensable to her comfort, and then with a smile hoped they would enjoy their drive, and returned into the house to summon Edith.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"LAURA," said Edward, when they were left alone, "what was the cause of your repelling manner to Gertrude just now? no one but herself would have endured it."

"Repelling?" exclaimed Laura; "indeed I did not mean it to be so. It was not convenient for me to take her, that was all."

"You mean," said Edward, almost sternly, "you are engaged with Miss Forester—why don't you tell me so at once?"

"Because ——" and Laura hesitated, and her eye sank under her husband's gaze. "You know it never pleases you to hear of her, and therefore I always think the less that is said the better."

"The less that is done, I should say," replied Edward. "You have had a specimen this morning of her gossiping interference in public matters, and you will be grievously mistaken if you imagine it will be different in private."

Laura's cheek became suddenly flushed, though for what cause it was difficult for Edward to understand.

"You must forgive me for speaking in this way, dearest," he added, mildly; "but you know the subject of complaint is an old one. Miss Forester never ought to have been your friend."

"But if she is," answered Laura, "what is to be done? We cannot draw back, after taking her to London and introducing her everywhere as our friend."

Edward restlessly paced the room, and after a pause of some instants, exclaimed, "And the General,

too, how one is deceived! There is no truth—no sincerity ——" Again he paused.

"Yes," replied Laura, desirous for private reasons to turn the current of censure in another direction, and not considering that it was impossible to separate the interests of the father and daughter—"the General I do believe, is false. He will support you, Edward, whilst you submit to him implicitly; but the very instant you propose to differ, he will cast you off."

"Let him do it!" exclaimed Edward; "let him turn against me if he will! I am not a person to submit implicitly to any man, far less to a pompous fool, whose only talent is intrigue. I will never be the slave of a party, and he knows it—they all know it, and that is the cause of offence."

"It is so unfair, too," said Laura, "after your allowing them so much liberty at the time of the election, and doing so many disagreeable things merely to please them."

"And what has been the consequence?" exclaimed Edward, indignantly; "I acted against my own sense of honour, because I fancied they had more experience than myself, and now they complain of me, because they say I have disappointed their expectation. What reason had they to suppose that because I listened to them in one case I should do so in all?"

"Miss Forester says," began Laura ——

"I wish never to hear the name again," interrupted Edward. "Forgive me, my dear Laura: you cannot know the family as I do; your nature is too open and guileless to understand them. They are false—false in word and in deed; and if it were possible to taint the simplicity of an angel's mind, they would make you false also."

Laura's brilliant colour for an instant faded to a deadly hue, and then as suddenly returned, while with

a hasty impulse she rose from her seat, and advanced towards her husband, as if about to speak, but the resolution, whatever it might have been, passed as rapidly as it had been formed; and without answering him, she occupied herself in collecting her work from the table. Edward's mind was too much absorbed to notice this sudden change; and recurring to his former subject of complaint, he repeated his indignant expression at General Forester's presumption, in supposing that he would consent to be an instrument in the hands of any man.

"And what is the point at issue between you?" inquired Laura; "is it any thing of importance?"

"Of the utmost, vital importance. But it is not one point—there are many—questions which concern the Church, and the poor, and the manufacturing districts; and on which the whole prosperity of the nation depends; and he and his party think, that because they supported me at the time I first came forward, I am now to agree to be led blindfold, and to vote just according to their will."

"There may come another election soon," said Laura; "when you will be better able to stand alone."

She stopped, expecting an answer; but Edward did not give it. He leant his head upon the mantelpiece, as if struck by some overpowering thoughts; and at the same moment the sound of footsteps announced the approach of a visitor; and Laura, with a conviction that it must be Miss Forester, hastened to prevent her from intruding herself upon Edward in his present mood of irritation. Left alone, Edward roused himself from his musing posture, but not for the purpose of exertion. He stood for some minutes, looking thoughtfully upon the splendid furniture of his drawing-room—the gilded couches and silk hangings, the marble vases and mosaic cabinets—the varied refine-

ments of luxury with which taste and extravagance had filled it; and then turned to gaze upon the beauty so profusely lavished upon the fair domain which owned him as its possessor. A brilliant sun-light was resting upon the foreground of the landscape, where the massive trunks of the splendid forest trees were marked with glittering lines, and the young leaves, just bursting into life, were sparkling with a golden hue. Deep shadows were cast upon the turf by the outstretched branches, beneath which the herded deer sought refuge from the noonday heat, and between the natural arches were caught occasional glimpses of the distant country, shrouded in the rich purple mist, which veils all that when clearly seen might mar the loveliness of nature. Edward gazed, but not in admiration. That which a stranger would have dwelt on with delight, to him brought no charm; for, written in legible characters on every tree and flower, traced even upon the cloudless heaven, he saw but one word—ruin; how distant he could not tell—how near he dared not think. Yet, whether close at hand, or thrown far off into future years, equally in the end ruin—and inevitable. Ingenuity and expedients might for a time ward off the evil day, but the follies of the past could never be retrieved. For one moment he ventured to contemplate the prospect, for he pictured only his own suffering; but the next brought before him the image of Laura, in her youthful grace and refinement, the spoiled child of luxury; and the remembrance of the innocent child, whose earthly fortunes would be sacrificed to a father's imprudence; and, unable to endure the bitterness of his feelings, with a vigorous effort he turned from the idea, and left the room, to seek, as he had often done before, a temporary forgetfulness in the claims of parliamentary business.

CHAPTER XXV.

"And that is Torrington Heath," said Gertrude, as she stood with her sister on the summit of a steep hill, from which was seen, at a short distance, a wild, open common, covered with furze and brambles, indented with cart ruts, and enlivened only by a long line of low mud hovels, the broken windows and bent palings of which bore testimony to the poverty of the inhabitants.

"Yes," replied Edith; "and unfortunately you are looking at the best side of the picture. Those cottages are much worse in the inside than the outside."

Gertrude forgot her usual habit of attention, whilst watching the groups of squalid children, who were playing in front of the cabins. "And can Edward really do nothing for the people?" she said, at length.

"He has done something," replied Edith; "that is, he has repaired the houses, and given the children clothes, and sometimes excused a few from paying rent; but they are such a wretched set; and the district is so large; it extends to the other side of the hill."

"It is clear what they want," said Gertrude; "a church, and a resident clergyman."

"Yes; no one doubts that, but I wish you would not talk of it."

"Why not?"

"Because it recalls so many hopes and plans which have come to nothing; it was a grievous mistake Edward's going into parliament."

"No, no," exclaimed Gertrude; "I cannot agree

with you there; with his high talents and principles, what could he have done better?"

"You don't know," began Edith; and then stopping suddenly, she added, "Can you bear a half-confidence, Gertrude?"

"I hope I could, but I have never been tried; perhaps it may be difficult from a sister."

"Yes," said Edith, thoughtfully; "sisters ought to be all in all to each other; but no sisters are ——"

"Few, rather," said Gertrude; "we may be among the exceptions."

"Not if you require unlimited confidence. You know I have told you in my letters, that I could not explain every thing I alluded to."

"Your letters have been puzzles very often," said Gertrude; "but with regard to confidence, I am very willing to take as much, or as little, as you may be able to give. Where we love, we must also trust."

"But if there is some one else whom I can talk to with greater freedom than I can to you, what should you say then?"

"Trust again," replied Gertrude; "besides, I really have no right to expect that you should be able to talk to me as if we had been together all our lives."

"But I wish it, above all things," said Edith; "if there were no obstacles. You will never guess the name of the only person who consoles me in all my troubles."

"Mr Dacre," said Gertrude; "I could have seen that he was not a common friend the first day he was with us, even if you had not spoken of him so often."

"Miss Forester is jealous," said Edith, laughing; "though I don't believe she has ever yet made up her mind whether I intend to be his wife, or his adopted daughter: but to return to matters of fact; Mr Dacre is really my principal friend and guide in

all cases of difficulty; but why he is so, must be one of the mysteries."

"And are these mysteries of consequence?" inquired Gertrude.

"Really I can hardly tell; once I thought they were of the greatest; but lately, both Mr Dacre and myself have begun to doubt our own convictions. Edward's very extravagance makes me comparatively easy about him."

"You forget," said Gertrude, "that I don't know the circumstances you refer to."

"Some are easily told," replied Edith: "there are reasons which used to make me afraid that Edward was living greatly beyond his income; but since he has been in parliament, he has been so separated from us, that we know much less of his affairs than we did; and now there is a report that he is to have a government appointment whenever a change of ministry comes, which every one declares must be soon: not that I believe reports in general, but there seems some foundation for this, because of Edward's style of living, which would be madness if he had not some prospects of the kind."

"I can hardly fancy that," said Gertrude; "he has a very good fortune."

"Ah! if you did but know all," began Edith; and then, remembering her promise to Edward, she added, "it seems so unkind, Gertrude, to be reserved with you."

"You must let me be the judge of the unkindness, dearest," said Gertrude, affectionately; "only tell me that you are not unhappy about any thing."

"No, I don't think I am—that is, not very—in fact, I don't let my mind dwell upon the future; it can do no good. Edward must understand his own affairs, and if he is to have this appointment, I hope it may all be right. But this would not have satis-

fied me some years ago, Gertrude. I should have been miserable then if he had not told me all."

"Yes," said Gertrude; "a wife makes an essential difference."

"Yet I could have borne that; I could have borne any thing," exclaimed Edith; "if—tell me, Gertrude, do you like Laura?"

Gertrude smiled at the abruptness of the question. "Like her, I do very much—more than I expected from your account. Love her I do not yet, but I am nearly certain I very soon shall."

"Do you really think so?" said Edith; "she is so unlike you; she has no idea of acting from fixed motives—it is all from impulse."

"An amiable impulse often, I should think," said Gertrude.

"Perhaps so, but still it is only impulse, and that is not likely to suit either you or me: at least I can answer for myself. Laura and I were not formed for the same hemisphere."

"Except that you have been placed there," said Gertrude in a careless tone, under which a grave meaning was only partially hidden.

"That is no reason for our suiting," said Edith.

"No! only for trying to suit."

"But you would not have any one who is endeavouring to do right associate with a person whose principles are worldly, would you?" exclaimed Edith: "the whole tone of the mind would be lowered by it."

"Don't you think there is a difference between relations and other people?" said Gertrude.

"Not much; only that if they are disagreeable, they are ten times worse than they would be as strangers, because you can't escape from them."

"Ah!" said Gertrude; "that is the very point; I know we cannot escape from them, and so, I sup-

pose, it was intended we should make the best of them."

Edith sighed. "I don't mean, of course," she said, "that I do not love my brother and sisters, or that I have no interest in my connexions; but it would be impossible to dance attendance upon them all day without neglecting other duties."

"I daresay it is difficult," said Gertrude; "and I know I am not a fair judge; but perhaps a little 'dancing attendance,' as you call it, might win their hearts, and induce them to help in the duties."

"It might be so," answered Edith thoughtfully; "but I don't think it likely at home."

Gertrude did not urge the subject. She had given a hint, and she left it to work its own way. They walked on for several minutes in silence.

"You don't mean to say," observed Edith at length, "that you would give up visiting poor people, and attending to schools."

"No, no," replied Gertrude; "all that I mean is, that our duties are like the circles of a whirlpool, and that the innermost includes home; and the next, perhaps, the rich and poor immediately about us. The circumstances of our position in life, our fortune and talents, seem in fact to point out our business."

"Rich people!" said Edith in surprise.

"Yes," replied Gertrude; "do you not remember my showing you the other day that Bishop Andrewes mentions, amongst the persons to be interceded for, those who were entitled to his prayers by vicinity of situation; as if that were in itself a sufficient claim?"

"But surely we should feel so tied down," said Edith, "in being forced to think of, and care for people, merely because they lived near us."

"I don't know that that is an objection; because, if we are not tied down, there may be as much self-will in choosing duties as pleasures."

Still Edith was inclined to object, and Gertrude, disliking even to appear dictatorial, made some common remark, so as to give an opening for changing the conversation; but Edith could not bear the thought of casting blame upon another when she had been in fault herself; and again recurred to Laura.

"Can you understand, Gertrude," she said, "that when I complain of Laura, it is not because I feel innocent. She may be wrong in some things, but I have been wrong too. You remember, perhaps, that I told you a long time ago, we had had a sort of quarrel about the removal of old Martha's cottage, because it intercepted the view from the morning room. It stood just where the opening is now, which shows the spire of Elsham church, and the top of the Roman hill. Laura urged that Martha should remove in defiance of Edward's promise—and Edward himself would have liked it, though I am certain nothing would have induced him to break his word. I own I was very angry, and said some unpardonable things, and Laura behaved extremely well; but we never made it up. I was shy, and we differed about the election, and unfortunately the day of the nomination I was too unwell to go to Allingham in the evening, which gave great offence. Stupidly enough, I sent a message instead of a note, and the message was not given. I have learnt a lesson, however, from that for the rest of my life. I have never trusted to messages since. Then after Martha's death they pulled the cottage down, and Laura rejoiced. I can't say that I sympathised, and I am not sure that Edward did either, for he had it taken away during his absence, and never said any thing about the view. A few observations passed then between Laura and me, which did not make us better friends;—I could not bear to see her so cold-hearted. But the worst thing of all was, that, when they went to London,

they took Miss Forester with them. I hated the intimacy, and so did Edward, but it still goes on, and it is considered a settled thing for her to go to town every year with them."

"I must say that is strange," said Gertrude. "Miss Forester and Laura I should fancy differed in every thing; that is, if Laura's countenance tells truth. Independent of its beauty, there is an openness and purity in its expression which charms me; and Miss Forester's is so very unlike it."

"So it is," said Edith; "and I really believe both faces speak the characters. Laura is very sincere, but Miss Forester has an immense power over her, notwithstanding: lately, indeed, there has been a change. Miss Forester still governs, but I think it is in a different way. Laura seems afraid of her, and I have seen her sometimes shrink away, as if she knew what Miss Forester was, and yet did not venture to cast her off. And besides this, Laura is grown so grave—melancholy I may say, at times; and she and Edward don't seem so happy together as they used to be. Edward is irritable; and Laura appears frightened at him. I have been at Allingham more the last few months, and have seen more of it. Generally Laura is in town at this season, but this year they hurried back unexpectedly, and gave no reasons for it. In fact, Gertrude, there is some mystery, but I have given up attempting to fathom it; and we all do tolerably well together. Laura and I are very civil."

"And Charlie," said Gertrude, "does not he help you to be friends?"

"Oh, no; he is quite spoilt, and I can't bear to see it. If I were his godmother it would be different, but a cousin of Laura's stood, because Jane refused, so I feel I have nothing to do with him. You must allow, now, that progressing at Allingham is out of

my power; I could never waste time in telling Charlie he is the sweetest little creature in the world, which is the only way to Laura's heart."

Gertrude did not say that she agreed, and Edith pressed for an answer.

"I don't see things exactly in the same light you do," replied Gertrude, after a short silence, "because if Laura were a labourer's wife you would go and play with her child directly, for the very purpose of making her feel you took an interest in her."

"But, if I do not take an interest," said Edith, "you would not have me a hypocrite."

They had reached the door of the cottage which Edith was wishing to visit, and Gertrude's reply was short; "You are interested in poor people," she said, "because they are fellow-creatures, and want help, and have never perhaps been properly taught their duty; and especially you are anxious to assist them, if they are members of the Church; Laura has all these claims, and one besides—she is Edward's wife."

Edith would willingly have continued the conversation, but the approach of the woman, to whom the house belonged, prevented her, and Gertrude was not sorry to defer a longer discussion until her sister had had more time for reflecting upon what had been said.

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